

CROSSFIRE
By James Moloney
UQP 0-7022-2384-0

Teachers Notes by Jean Yates

INTRODUCTION

Luke Aldridge is a fairly typical teenager – slim, gangly and awkward and somewhat unsure of himself. The son of divorced parents, Luke resents his mother and her strict discipline, whilst idolising his father and adopting his great interest in guns. He resents his mother's constant criticism of his father and the fact that she has allowed him only very limited weekend access to his son.

When Luke and his friend CT are discovered to have a rifle in their locker ready for afternoon shooting practice, they are suspended from school. Luke fears retribution from his mother, but, when she is badly injured and hospitalised, Luke is forced to spend his week of suspension at his grandparents' house. Far from punishing his son for his behaviour, Wayne takes him on a shooting trip with his mates.

Luke is initially delighted to be included in his father's plans and relishes the opportunity to spend this time with his father and to prove to his father how much of a man he has become. Yet, somehow the hunting trip all begins to go horribly wrong. Luke is disconcerted by the cruelty demonstrated by Wayne and his friends and, when Wayne's sick sense of humour backfires on Luke, he begins to see his father in quite a different light. The arrival of Tom, the gentle Vietnam veteran enables Luke to re-evaluate his notion of courage and manliness.

Luke returns from the hunting trip very confused by the events that have taken place and feeling terribly alone. His doubts about his father's behaviour are compounded by stories he has heard about his mother's behaviour when she was young. He is annoyed by what he regards as her hypocrisy. Finally in desperation and loneliness Luke turns to his mother and tells her the truth about his week, in spite of the fact that he knows she will probably further reduce his contact with Wayne as a result. For the first time in his life, Luke stands up to Alison and asserts himself as a young adult and his own person.

When a depressed and inebriated Wayne turns up at their house with his rifle, Luke realizes that his parents constant fighting could have dangerous consequences. He realises that he must stand up to both his father and his mother and draw upon all his courage if he is to salvage the situation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Sydney, James Moloney grew up and was educated in Brisbane. He completed teacher training at Griffith University and also holds diplomas in Teacher Librarianship and Computer Education. He has taught in a number of Queensland State Schools as both a classroom teacher and a librarian. His experiences as a young teacher in western Queensland have had a profound effect on his writing, especially in his early novels.

James now writes full-time and has written over twenty books for children and Young Adults. His first novel, *Crossfire* was listed as a Notable Book in the CBCA awards in 1993. His short novel *Swashbuckler* won the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Award in 1996 and in the following year, *A Bridge to Wiseman's Cove* was named Book of the Year in the CBCA's Older Readers category. His other titles have appeared regularly on shortlists for literary prizes and children's choice awards ever since.

James says: *'I like to get inside the head of today's adolescents, to connect with the passion they have for life and understand what they care about. The challenge then is to express it in a story. That challenge keeps me young. I love it.'*

THEMES

Courage

- Tom, the Vietnam veteran demonstrates a different type of courage from that espoused by Wayne and his mates.
- Luke's ability to stand up to his father and save his mother's life. *With a sickening jolt, Luke realised that if a tragedy was to be avoided here, it was up to him to take control. Only he could save his parents from each other.*

Maturity

- Luke grows to see his father for who he truly is. He no longer idolises Wayne, but is in fact sickened by his behaviour. Unlike his father, Luke's conscience is clearly troubled by Alison's illness and by the events of the hunting trip. He even grows to understand and perhaps even grudgingly appreciate Alison's strictness.

Divorced families

- Luke resents his mother's strictness and idolises his absent father. Wayne plays little part in raising Luke and has few responsibilities. He is able to spend his

- contact time playing with Luke, taking him to football matches and encouraging his interest in shooting.
- Wayne deals with Alison in a very immature way, avoiding her wherever possible and bad-mouthing her in front of Luke.
 - Alison is constantly critical of Wayne and fearful that Luke will grow up to be just like his father.
 - Luke is caught in the middle, resenting his mother and delighting in his father's company. Perhaps gaining his father's approval and showing him how mature and capable he is becomes even more important to Luke because of the fact that his father is not around.
 - Luke's attitude towards his mother and her strict regime is perhaps exacerbated by the fact that she is the only parent who disciplines him.
 - Wayne spends his access weekends with Luke playing, attending football matches together and generally having a great time.

Loyalty

- Luke is fiercely loyal to Wayne and resents his mother's criticism of his father. When he is upset by his father's behaviour, part of his unhappiness is that he feels disloyal to his father for questioning him.

Luke was angered by Alison's savage contempt for his father, but there was fear with his anger, a dread that hid in the darkness. He was discovering two parents he had never seen before and he recoiled from them both.

Confronting the truth

- Luke's reaction to his father's behaviour on the shooting party. *It all seemed rather ridiculous now, quite childish. A cold hard stone was settling in the pit of Luke's stomach. He knew it was made of loathing and disgust and shame, but he was unsure where to direct these emotions. He was confused and uneasy, unsure what he felt and thought.*
- *Luke was angered by Alison's savage contempt for his father, but there was fear with his anger, a dread that hid in the darkness. He was discovering two parents he had never seen before and he recoiled from them both.*
- Danielle ultimately leaves Wayne, realising that he will never grow up.
- Daggitt warns Luke about his father's depression and anger

Being your own person

- Luke learns that whilst he may be the product of the two of them, he is different from both of his parents and is his own person. *I'm not Dad and I'm not you. I'm me, Luke Alridge and I'm not going to be a copy of anyone! You've got to give me a chance to find out things for myself.*
- Luke stands up to his friend CT and it is clear that he will no longer be a part of CT's shooting sessions

CHARACTERS

Luke Aldridge

- 14 years old. Slim and angular. Moves awkwardly as if *he hadn't yet learned to control his rapidly growing body.*
- Idolises his father and shares his keen interest in guns.
- Resents his mother's attitude towards his father. *It's not Dad's fault any of this. You're not being fair to him because you hate him so much. Well, to me he's great.*
- *My Dad's a good bloke. I'd rather be with him than here with Mum.*
- Resents his mother and her strictness. *He feared his mother far more than his school principal.*
- Luke matures during the course of the novel and begins to see both of his parents in a new light. He no longer sees guns and shooting as an expression of manliness and strength.

Wayne Aldridge

- Irresponsible
- Refuses to grow up
- *He's still a boy playing with his toys and guns and racing about with his mates.*
- A real lad – drinks at the football then dodges the RBT teams on the way home.
- *Life is a game to him. He was always totally irresponsible. Towards himself and everyone else. He's never given a thought to anyone but himself since the day he was born.*
- Chucks sickies at work to be able to go on a hunting trip with his mates
- Doesn't ever have any money. Makes hollow promises to Luke
- Not only does he not punish Luke for being suspended, he rewards him by deciding to take Luke on a shooting holiday behind Alison's back while she's in hospital.
- Luke trusts his father implicitly and totally idolises him.
- *Luke was so proud of his father. The sharpest tongue in the footy crowd, the most powerful gun and now he had outsmarted the coppers.*
- *Luke had never been so proud in all his fourteen years. This was the best day of his life. He'd seen his father dust off a pig with a miraculous shot, he'd impressed his father with his marksmanship, and now with his first attempt he'd killed a rabbit, earning the praise of every man present.*
- Luke is unnerved by his father's attitude to the injured pig, but *the last thing he wanted was for the others to think he was soft.*
- When Wayne goes to shoot the cat and the others warn him that his rifle is too powerful he retorts that he doesn't care if he "blows the filthy thing into a dozen pieces."

- *A man's got to be good with a gun no matter what they say. It's an important skill to learn. People who say it's dangerous annoy me. If everyone was taught to use a gun, it wouldn't be dangerous at all. Guns aren't dangerous, you know, it's people who are dangerous.* Luke feels that these are not his father's original thoughts and words.
- When Wayne is almost mauled by the pig and rescued by Doggitt he refuses to acknowledge that he was in any danger, nor to thank his friend for helping him.
- Wayne tricks Luke into using the powerful rifle and laughs at his inability to do so. *As Luke looked up into his father's face he saw that he was unable to keep the smug smile from his face ... The realization of what his father had done hurt him more than the dull ache in his shoulder. This strange, nameless pain burned deeper inside than anything he'd ever known before.*

Danielle

- Is much more responsible than Wayne.
- She collects Luke from the hospital when his father isn't around, cooks him a meal and stays until his Aunt Belinda arrives.
- She doesn't like Wayne avoiding the police. She correctly predicts that his behaviour will catch up with him.
- She lives with Wayne, but is never referred to as his girlfriend. This illustrates Wayne's lack of commitment.
- Eventually she moves out, realizing that Wayne will never change.

Alison Aldridge – a trainee nurse who feels guilty about being at work

- Conscientious
- Strict disciplinarian
- Distant from Luke. *She never talked with him, she only talked at him.*
- Luke is disconcerted by his mother's appearance after her mauling by the cat. *This made her appear frail and vulnerable in a way Luke had never expected to see his mother. He thought of her as a strong woman, never beaten.*
- Wayne's friends reveal that she was a real tearaway at school, often suspended. Consequently Luke sees her behaviour as being hypocritical. *His mother the dragon, the tyrant, the woman who hit the roof if he so much as thought about breaking a rule was a legend amongst her mates for just such behaviour.*
- Regrets the mistakes she made in her youth and the fact that she never took life seriously enough and hence is just graduating in her 30s. *When I'm hard on you it's because I'm determined that you will never have to fight your way through the way I've had to.*
I lost ten years of my life because I didn't want to grow up.

CT (Cristo Tertzowjic)

- Has absent parents who have very little idea of his actions.
- *He knew all about adults who didn't always live up to their promises*

- Still interested in shooting etc. in spite of the suspension. Luke loses respect for his interest. You can see that this friendship will be short lived.

Tom

- A Vietnam veteran who has experienced and demonstrated true heroism and courage. His gentle manner and compassion for animals and humans provides Luke with a stark contrast to his father and his friends.
- When Tom apologised for having to shoot the injured sheep to put it out of its misery none of the other men could understand why he was apologising.

DISCUSSION TOPICS/ ACTIVITIES

- Consider the impact of divorce on the family structure. How does having an absent parent change the dynamics? Do you think Luke would have the same sort of relationship with his father if Wayne were around all the time?
- We see Alison Aldridge through the eyes of her son and hence we see her as being somewhat harsh and lacking in compassion. Yet it is later revealed that a lot of this is the result of regret and fear that her son will waste his life in the same way that she and Wayne did. We see that her behaviour is motivated by concern and love. Taking the persona of Alison, write a passage that explains her motivation, attitude and behaviour towards Luke. This could be written as a conversation with between Alison and either her sister, Belinda, or flat-mate Sally.
- During the course of the novel, Luke loses his blind admiration for his father and begins to see his flaws. This is a common situation for many children, especially for boys and their fathers. Consider why boys have a need to gain their fathers' respect.
- Students could consider how their own relationships with their parents may have changed as they have grown up. What sorts of things may cause this transition in their attitudes towards their parents?
- It takes a lot of courage for Luke to stand up to his father and to CT and to follow his own beliefs. What sort of retribution can boys (or girls) experience from standing up for their beliefs? Consider other situations where this may be necessary.
- Consider the Ian Mudie poem "My Father Began As a God". In what ways are the poem and the novel similar? In the later stanzas of the poem, the child regains respect for the father. Is it likely that Luke and his father will ever have a similar reconciliation?

My Father Began as a God by Ian Mudie

My father began as a god,
full of heroic tales
of days when he was young.
His laws were as immutable
as if brought down from Sinai,
which indeed he thought they were.

He fearlessly lifted me to heaven
by a mere swing to his shoulder,
and made me a godling
by seating me astride
our milch-cow's back, and, too
upon the great white gobbler
of which others went in constant fear.

Strange then how he shrank and shrank
until by my time of adolescence
he had become a foolish old man
with silly and outmoded views
of life and of morality.

Stranger still
that as I became older
his faults and his intolerances
scaled away into the past,
revealing virtues
such as honesty, generosity, integrity.

Strangest of all
how the deeper he recedes into the grave
the more I see myself
as just one more of all the little men
who creep through life
not knee-high to this long-dead god.