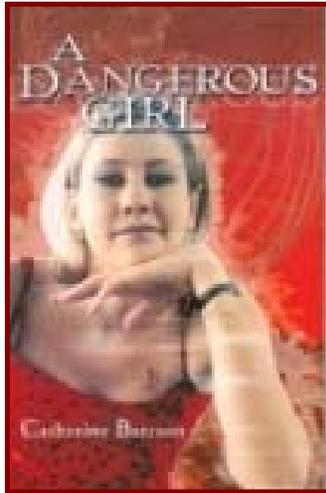


UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

A DANGEROUS GIRL

Catherine Bateson



Teachers' Notes

Written by Catherine Bateson

ISBN: 978 07022 3168 1 / AU\$18.95

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.

Summary	2
Style	2
Free Verse	3
Prose Poem	4
Haiku	4
Sonnets	5
Themes	6
Friendship	6
Love and Sex	7
About the Author	9

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

SUMMARY

These teachers notes have been compiled by the author in consultation with English teachers to form the basis for a close text study. Discussion questions and writing exercises are included.

In *A Dangerous Girl* two very different romantic relationships counterpoint each other. John and Leigh's passionate and doomed love is contrasted with the slow-growing, steady and more domestic relationship between Nick and Merri. These are mirrored by the friendships between Merri and Leigh and John and Nick. In the background is the game of D & D they play, enabling them to explore different roles in a fantasy world.

STYLE

A Dangerous Girl is written as a verse novel, an increasingly popular form in Australian writing. The four characters each write quite different poetry and play with different poetic forms. Leigh's poems are titled as journal entries, Nick's take the form of small prose poem emails while John and Merri's are mostly free verse.

Why a verse novel?

Novels are great - you can immerse yourself in someone else's story for a while but a novel about loss and loneliness can't be memorised the way I once did Adrian Henri's poem, 'Without You' when this boy...well, that's another story. Poetry, whether in the rhythmic, formal language of Yeats speaking of Maud Gonne or Lake Innisfree, or in the colloquial, pop language of the Mersey Sound poets, crosses time and the world, to speak directly to me and give my emotions validity.

Which isn't to say I didn't start writing *A Dangerous Girl* in prose. I did, but I stopped enjoying that and so I started to write it all over again in poetry and the story started to sing for me again. I love the intensity and urgency of poetry and song lyrics and the way they stay in your head and talk about your love, your pain and your joy.

The verse novel is perfect for a teenage audience. Many teenagers are avid, if secret, poets and song lyricists. They already know that pared down, laconic language can pack a gut-punch of emotion through the songs that beat hypnotically through their walkmans. And they're not afraid of being taken right into someone's head and heart. A verse novel reduces distractions - it's a story in bite-sized gulps - perfect for the cybergeneration.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

I am not the only writer writing verse novels for young adults. Steve Herrick, also with University of Queensland Press, writes verse novels. The Spangled Drongo won the NSW Premier's Award and others have been shortlisted for the CBCA Awards.

Discuss

A verse novel is shorter than a novel in prose. There's less description, for example, and less background information given by a third person narrator. This places certain responsibilities on the reader. You have a lot of imagining to do, to see these characters; what they look like, where they live, how they might spend their days. What you are given by the writer is a close-up of their emotional lives.

- Write a note comparing the writing style of *A Dangerous Girl* with another novel you have studied or read recently. From whose point of view were the two stories written? Was there a third-person or a first-person narrator? How much description was given in both books? How would you describe the style of each? You might think about words like immediate, engaging, panoramic, conversational, intimate and so on.
- Write a list for both books and compare your words for each. Share this in small groups or with the whole class.

Writing Exercises

- Rewrite 'Meredith Watching Leigh', the opening poem of *A Dangerous Girl* as a piece of prose. What changes did you have to make? Which version do you prefer?
- Take a short story you have written and try to rewrite it as a poem. What changes did you have to make? How did the rewriting affect the language you used?
- There are many poems which describe different settings. Read a selection of poems and choose three which you think have effective descriptions of place. Now, pick a setting from *A Dangerous Girl* and write a poem which describes this setting.
- Try experimenting with different forms of poetry. Below are definitions of the forms used in *A Dangerous Girl*, but you'll find many more poetry forms explained in poetry handbooks if you are interested.

Free Verse

Free verse is the most common poetic form used in the Western world in the twentieth century. This is poetry which doesn't rhyme and doesn't follow a strict metrical pattern but rather echoes our everyday speech patterns relying on heightened language, the use of symbol, metaphor, simile and imagery to create poetry. People often say that this form is nothing more than cut-up prose and while this may be sometimes a just criticism, if you read most contemporary

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

poetry out aloud, you'll find that the line breaks give the poetry a rhythm and emphasis which would not happen if the poem was rewritten in prose.

Writing Exercise

- Take one of your favourite free verse poems and re-write without line breaks. How does this change your reading of the piece? Read both aloud, remembering that a line break indicates a slight pause - sometimes as long as you'd pause for a comma, sometimes less, if the line is enjambed. Could you hear the difference in the two readings?

Prose Poem

As the boundaries between prose and poetry blur, hybrid forms occur such as the prose poem. The prose poem is simply what it is says it is - a poem with no line breaks. It can be a lyric or a narrative poem and, although there are no line breaks, all other poetry writing techniques can be employed. Frequently the paragraph breaks in a prose poem mirror the stanza.

Discuss

- Why do you think, of all the characters, Nick is the one who writes prose poems?

Writing Exercise

Re-write one of Nick's prose poems, putting in the line breaks. Think carefully where you'd put line breaks - the golden rule is that the pause a line break creates places the emphasis on both the word ending the line and the next word beginning the new line - what kinds of words do you want emphasised?

Haiku

A Japanese form of poetry, the haiku in its most traditional form consists of 17 syllables in three lines - 5, 7, 5. Each haiku had to make a reference to a season, either directly or indirectly, and was about the natural world. More recently the haiku has become a favourite form for Western poets and some of the rules have been relaxed to reflect the use of the English language. Many haiku competitions now state that the haiku must no longer than 17 syllables and do not insist on the regular line pattern. It is not uncommon to see contemporary haiku written in just one line. The seasonal reference is still important to most poets but how that is interpreted is up to the individual. It might be useful to compile a list of words you associate with each season, trying to avoid cliches. So, European wasps would be summer, and so on.

Nick's haiku (pp. 42, 86 & 95) are not strictly speaking haiku as they refer to his own feelings - another example of how the form's rules have relaxed. Haiku are snapshots of the world you see and are extremely useful to all writers as they

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

sharpen both one's powers of observation and ability to pare down an image succinctly.

Many writers, such as Australian poet, Robert Gray, enjoy the discipline of seventeen syllable haikus. Others like Joanne Burns relish the freedom of the prose poem which dispenses with conventional free verse line breaks while retaining a sense of heightened language and poetic imagery.

Writing Exercises:

- Write a haiku in strict traditional form - that is, it must have 17 syllables broken into three lines of 5, 7 and 5. It must refer to a season and be a snapshot picture of something in the natural world you can see.
- Now write a haiku which uses something you see in the natural world to mirror your own feelings - it might be a happy dog strolling across the football oval which reflects your own joy at spring coming, or it could be a lonely swing swinging by itself in the playground. Don't mention yourself in the haiku - let the image speak for you. Read these aloud in groups - how many people knew what you were feeling in your haiku?

Sonnets:

There are different forms of this fourteen line poem which have slightly different rhyme and stanza patterns.

One of the most famous forms is the Shakespearean sonnet which has a pattern of three four line stanzas: abab cdcd efef, followed by a rhyming couplet, gg. The sonnet has had a revival of popularity with the New Formalism movement in America. Many poets are returning to strict poetic forms, sometimes as a way of harnessing and controlling themes such as child abuse, sexuality, explorations into spirituality and so on. These highly personal themes can sometimes be more universally understood if the reader, and writer, must focus on the craft of the communication as well as on the content. Traditionally, the sonnet was a favourite form for love poetry and this is how John uses it in *A Dangerous Girl*.

Discuss:

The opening line of John's sonnet (p.57) echoes a famous sonnet by Elizabeth Barrett Browning from her sequence of love poems, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, 'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.' What is one of the main differences between John's poem and Barrett Browning's? While John writes what it is he loves about Leigh, Barrett Browning lists how she loves her lover, in this case, the poet Robert Browning. Other differences are of course, the language employed by both and the particular form of sonnet.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

Writing Exercise:

Thinking carefully about Barrett Browning's poem and rewrite it in more contemporary language. Are the ways she loved Robert Browning pertinent to the way we might describe how we love someone today? You might like to start with a list of the ways you would love someone - with passion, with a comradely feeling like partners in political activism, with a quiet, familiar friendship of those who have grown up together, platonically like siblings or whole-heartedly with every facet of your self.

THEMES**Friendship**

The novel opens with Meredith watching Leigh, the new girl at school. She is intrigued by the confident games Leigh plays with clothes - becoming first a feral, and then a mod. Leigh, who needs a friend in this new school, saunters over and introduces herself.

The friendship begins.

Discuss:

- What makes Leigh choose Merri to be her new friend?
- Why is Merri attracted to Leigh?
- When Leigh dumps John, she loses contact with Merri. Why do you think this is so?
- What do you think Leigh and Merri learnt from each other during their friendship?
- How do you think the language of their poems reflects their characters?

Writing Exercise:

Write two poems for two different characters which talk about the beginning of their friendship. Think of the language the characters might employ and how that could make their poems identifiably theirs and different to their friend's. How else could you signal to the reader that poems belong to different characters? Don't forget the obvious - the title!

John rescues Nick from bullies and this begins their friendship. At this stage of their lives however, it is Nick who feels protective towards John during this vulnerable stage of his life.

Discuss:

- What do John and Nick have in common?
- Do you think their friendship will survive?
- How would Nick describe Leigh?
- What kind of influence does Nick see Leigh having on John? Do you agree with him?

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- The novel refers to Nick's early abuse as a child by his father. (pp.112 & 119) How do you think this has helped shape his character?

John didn't complete his schooling because of a debilitating attack of glandular fever. Now he feels as though he has been left behind.

What impact has this experience had on John?

Writing Exercise:

In the poem, 'Fever' (p.34), John describes an actual event which changed his life but he speaks of it in language which employs poetic imagery: the winter passes 'in an ache of dreams and fever', the clock is 'stuck on 3.00 am/for four months', even the words in his books are likened to dancer's legs. Many writers draw on their own life experiences for their work but the act of writing about them, trying to find the best way of communicating the experience to the reader, distances the writer and transforms the work to fiction.

Try writing about something that has happened to you thinking all the time about imagery, metaphor, simile and other poetic tools.

How did this effect your way of thinking about the experience?

Did you begin to feel the 'you' in the piece becoming a character?

In *A Dangerous Girl*, Leigh and Merri become best friends, Nick and John are best friends and John and Merri are brother and sister. Nonetheless, there is a strong friendship between John and his sister.

Discuss:

- What do you think unites John and Merri?
- How do you think John feels about Nick and Merri's relationship?
- What complications could you see arising out of this triangular relationship?
- Write a list of words John would use to describe Nick.
- Write a list of words Merri would use to describe Nick.
- Write a list of words Nick would use to describe John.

Writing Exercise

Triangular relationships often form the basis of stories. Can you think of some different kinds of relationships which potentially produce conflict and tension? Write a list as a class of some interesting triangular relationships.

Love and Sex

Leigh and John's passionate romance is doomed, largely because of their different expectations. John wants to believe he is in this relationship

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

permanently. He fantasises about marrying Leigh. She reluctantly dumps him when he gets too serious.

Discuss:

- Why do you think Leigh breaks up with John?
- To what extent is she responsible for John's reaction?
- What do you think Leigh feels at the end?
- John deals with his pain by getting drunk and attempting a bungled suicide.
- How serious was John's attempt to end his life and what was the major cause?
- What alternatives could John have taken to gain control of his life?
- Suicide is a real problem, particularly among teenage boys. How would you deal with someone who came to you and said they felt like killing themselves?

Writing Exercise: (For pairs of students)

With a partner, write a dialogue between two friends, one of whom is contemplating suicide. If possible, read the resulting dialogues out in groups or in class. How helpful were the varying responses? How realistic were the calls for help?

Organisations like KidsHelpline and Lifeline deal with suicide calls all the time. The telephone counselors are carefully trained to talk to sad, angry and hurt people. If you know someone who might be in trouble, encourage them to seek assistance.

Meredith and Nick's relationship is founded on a long-standing friendship between the two. Their affection for each other deepens into a grounded love.

Merri states:

We have to make something more solid
than our bodies joining in the night's meltdown.
We need some tough, plain words
to hold together. (p.112)

Discuss:

- Which type of relationship would you prefer to be in and why?
- Write a list of ten adjectives to describe the relationship between Leigh and John and the relationship between Merri and Nick.
- Do you think Merri and Nick's relationship will last - why/why not?

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- Merri says, 'I'm scared of winning too much/too soon' (p.112) - what is she scared of?

Writing Exercise:

In 'Waking' (p. 112), Merri likens her newfound relationship Nick to winning a car in a raffle without a licence, petrol money or a map. What other metaphors you could use to describe a relationship? Write a list of ideas and then choose one and write a poem in which you use and extend your metaphor. This relationship could be between two friends, family members etc. - it needn't be romantic.

Afterword

The sequel to *A Dangerous Girl* will be published next year.

What do you think will happen to each of the characters?

Writing exercise:

Write each character's first poem in the new novel.

- Line break - term referring to the break which occurs at the end of a line of poetry even when that line does not complete a whole phrase or sentence. Line breaks are there to tell the reader how to read the poem - a break equals a small pause like a comma and creates rhythm in free verse.
- Enjambed lines occur when a phrase is continued from one line to the next, eg. 'Merri didn't say when she walks into a room/the temperature rises,' The line break still signals a slight pause in the reading, drawing the reader's attention to both the end of one line and the beginning of the next.
- Stanzas separate blocks of verse from one another. Sometimes these units form complete ideas, sometimes they are enjambed. In a prose poem, paragraph breaks can be particularly important, creating rhythms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine Bateson's books have received much acclaim. Commendations for her books include:

Rain May and Captain Daniel

Winner CBCA Book of the Year Awards Younger Readers 2003

Winner Queensland Premier's Literary Awards Best Children's Book 2003

Shortlisted NSW Premier's Awards – Patricia Wrightson

Recommended Reading List for Australian Family Therapists Award for Children's Literature

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

Millie & the Night Herron

Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Notable Australian Book 2005

Painted Love Letters

Winner Australian Family Therapists Award for Children's Literature 2003

Honour Book CBCA Book of the Year Awards Older Readers 2003

Shortlisted NSW Premier's Literary Awards – Ethel Turner Prize 2003

The Year It All Happened

Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Notable Australian Book 2002

Catherine Bateson grew up in a second-hand bookshop in Brisbane frequented by leading Australian writers including Tom Shapcott and Bill Jones. This, she says, gave her 'the incredibly false view of the world that everybody reads and writes'. The daughter of a journalist mother and father who was for many years Editor of The Australian Journal, Catherine's passion for writing is a lifelong one.