

# Young Digger

Anthony Hill

Teachers' Notes by Roger Watts

## Introduction

*Young Digger* is the second of Anthony Hill's 'biographical novels' about young people in the First World War. Interestingly, the majority of this book is concerned with events immediately after the conclusion of hostilities. While the story of Henri's journey to Australia is fascinating, no less interesting is the attempt to recreate his past. It seems that *Young Digger* has been present at some of the most intense battles and significant moments of the conflict, and it is fascinating to explore the history of these events.

If you're looking for contemporary relevance, Henri's story makes an interesting comparison with the modern world. Attitudes have changed a great deal since his time, and now there are a great many more questions surrounding the attempts of people to enter Australia, particularly illegally. Sadly, too many young people are still involved with war. There are suicide bombers inflicting carnage on innocent victims, and children witnessing the deaths of family members in numerous conflicts around the world. Child soldiers are enforced into action in Sierra Leone, not to mention the sad situation in Iraq.

Anthony Hill's story effectively recreates the period and the acts of kindness of the men who have survived the horrors of the First World War. Our sympathies are with the boy and his mentor on their journey from Europe to Queensland, but how would Australians react today if the boy were Iraqi, or Afghani or Timorese? Would he finish up in a detention centre? These are not issues that Hill raises, but they are interesting questions, the answers to which can be compared with the prevailing attitudes in this book.

The writer has focused his attention on telling Henri's narrative in a compelling way, so it is interesting to look at the novel's structure, and the way it has revealed the events of the past. Hill has been conscientious in documenting his sources, and it is equally rewarding to explore the characterization, not only of Henri, but his mentor, Tim Tovell. The writer has only indirectly explored the effect of the boy's experiences on him through the dark dreams, yet a close reading of the text reveals a character whose future may have been more troubled than those who were involved with him might have expected.

## Narrative outline

This biographical novel alternates the story of the troopship *Kaiser-I-Hind*'s return to Australia, with Henri (Honore) Hemene's story of adoption by the 4th Squadron of the Royal Australian Flying Corps in Germany. The boy, whose father was killed at the Battle of Mons, and his mother and sister killed when their house was bombed at Lille, attached himself to various British and Australian Units before commencing his journey to Australia. The book follows his initial adoption by the 4th Squadron. With the coming of the Armistice, the Squadron packs up and retraces Henri's steps through France, giving them an opportunity to investigate his history. He is smuggled into England and eventually participates in a march past the Prince of Wales on ANZAC Day. The smuggling act is repeated with the complicity of the unit's Commanding Officer and the boy commences his boat trip to Australia where he meets with Tom Ryan, the Governor of Queensland. On arrival in Perth the two strands of the story come together, and by the time the ship has reached Melbourne, Henri has become a celebrity and is able to complete his journey to Queensland. Circumstances force him to

return to Melbourne to find work where he eventually dies in 1928. Curiously, Tim Tovell, the boy's father figure is virtually ignored by the military authorities in making Henri's funeral arrangements.

### **Structure of the novel**

The biographical novel is a hybrid form of writing. It contains a natural tension between the need to be historically accurate (and hopefully insightful) with the need to tell a story.

In the Author's Note Anthony Hill states that he has claimed some 'artistic licence' in 'psychologically crucial scenes' and that the 'the story is vital.' However he has included a set of endnotes for 'those readers who prefer a more conventional approach.'

The structure of the book therefore offers a rich area of research for those who are interested in this form, and in the writer's technique. (See Student Activities Q 1 & 2)

## **Characters**

### **Henri**

1. 'The boy spoke in an engaging way: one designed to flatter and to charm.'

Consider the reasons for the boy's acceptance by the 4th Squadron. He could so easily have been kicked out like the German children, but he wasn't.  
(See student activities Q 3)

2. Initially he is very aggressive towards the German children (p.30). How would you judge his behaviour? Is his revenge justified?

3. What does the incident of the stolen gun reveal about him (p.31)? Is this typical of him, or an isolated reaction to an extreme situation?

4. Look also at how he behaves:

- when he is allowed to drink (pp 20, 50, 72)
- when he wants to fly (pp 54, 76)
- when he is involved in playing 2up (p.153)

5. How do the other airmen treat him (p.78)?

6. Remembering that this is traumatic wartime, and an almost exclusive male society, what is the likely effect of his treatment by the other flyers. Consider:

- the acquisition of a uniform (p.40)
- the provision of food – and drink (p.52)
- the buying of toys (p.160)
- gambling (p.155)
- singing bawdy songs (p. 90)

7. It is worth considering the extent to which Henri loses touch with reality as a result of his past experiences.

'He's blanked so much from his mind.' (p.101)  
(See student activities Q 6)

8. Henri is presented as a little boy who is looking for 'Mum' and not only that, he is determined to go back to Australia with Tim.

'There is only one more thing I want to do,' the boy exclaimed. 'I want to see Tim's Gertie.'

To what extent does Henri manipulate Tim, or would you simply say that he is a child and as such needs protection?

9. Read the accounts of Henri's role in the smuggling operation (pp 3, 129, 134, and 198). Note his excitement. He sees everything as fun and as an adventure. Is this just normal childhood exuberance or is it a sign of something more disturbing. Note his attitude to Tim just before they disembark in Perth (p.3). Tim allows Henri to overrule his better judgement, with potentially very serious consequences.

10. What would be the likely effect on him of being presented to Queen Marie of Romania (p.150), and marching past the Prince of Wales (p.166)?

'Henri was fizzing with elation and a dangerous sense of self importance' (p.150)

11. *Young Digger* is mainly concerned with the events leading up to Henri's arrival in Australia. There is less detail given concerning his later life in Melbourne with Hec Wilson. We are given clues as to Henri's dissatisfaction with his apprenticeship. We are told of his 'restlessness' (pp 20 & 222), his failed naturalisation (p. 221), his 'growing pains,' and his 'boyish cheek' (p.220). Those qualities that were so endearing during the war were now proving to be a problem. We read that Henri's new girlfriend 'was helping to steady him' (p.222), and that Hec Wilson wrote a letter to Tim outlining the boy's faults, but we do not know the contents.

Were these normal adolescent growing pains, or was Henri suffering from the effects of his experiences?

## **Tim**

1.'He'd chosen the boy's guardian well. At forty, Tim was one of the oldest men in the squadron. He'd see the lad right.' (p.8)

Would you agree with Hill's assessment of Tim as a guardian? What are the benefits of Tim's age? Consider his reaction to Henri and drinking and gambling. What are the drawbacks?

2. To what extent are Tim's actions a reaction to the death of his own son (p.145)?

3. Hill suggests that 'the seed of an idea had planted itself in his mind' as early in the book as p.24, immediately after Henri's first arrival. This suggests that Tovell was already planning to take Henri with him. This is confirmed on p.47, when the Tovell brothers look at one another and recognise each other's thoughts.

Is this a realistic reflection of Tovell's character or merely a device used by Hill to increase narrative suspense? Whilst this is a fairly hypothetical question it is worth considering the effect on him of his religion and the later events taking place in Australia, particularly the death of Tim's own son.

4. Read p.106. Tim is adamant. 'I haven't the will to deny him...' but given the choice of an orphanage in France or taking Henri back to Australia, are Tim's actions justified? Do you approve of his determination?

5. Tovell is seen to exercise great care and concern for Henri. Note Hill's use of the St Christopher image (pp 161 & 162)

How significant are Tim's religious beliefs in his treatment of the boy?

6. The use of the 'Dinkum Oil' must have been very difficult for him. Was its use justified? (pp 79 & 159)? Note that the other airmen did not approve of beating the child.

7. 'If Henri weren't so willing it would almost be as if Tim were 'stealing' him' (p.119).

Padre Gault raises serious doubts about the wisdom of attempting to take Henri back to Australia. 'That's taking a big risk soldier. And a foolish one...I wonder if you've thought of the consequences for the boy...'

There are several occasions when the opportunity is there for Henri to be placed with people of his own culture who would love him (p.108) and even after he has arrived in Australia Tim is offered 1500 pounds for Henri to live with a French woman who has lost her own son (p.199). Yet both these opportunities are rejected. (See student activities Q 12)

### **The Officers**

1. Hill says himself that there 'were a number of gaps in the story...especially...with the precise role played by the officers in the smuggling operation.'

Why must this be?

2. Investigate the role played by the officers in smuggling Henri on and off the ship, particularly Major Ellis.

Does his age make a difference? What is his relationship with the men in his squadron? Why is he so sympathetic to Tim?

3. Henri lived with Hec Wilson for much longer than he lived with Tim Tovell. Does this explain Tim's isolation from the funeral and memorial proceedings or are there other reasons?

4. How do students feel about the behaviour of Major Coleman concerning Henri's funeral arrangements?

### **Student Activities**

1. 'The story is vital.'

- Use the activity sheet to plot the narrative structure of the book.
- Identify those moments of heightened suspense (eg. the scenes where Henri is smuggled on and off ship) that maintain the reader's interest.
- How has the author highlighted these moments?
- Considering the book as a whole, how have these moments been placed in the book?

2. Anthony Hill has used an unusual time sequence to tell the story.

- Use the Activity Sheet to place the flashback/forward scenes.
- Consider their relationship to the moments of heightened suspense.



Note: We suggest that the sheet be photocopied and enlarged for use by students to investigate the narrative structure of the book as a whole.

5. Read Chapter 9 (pp 96–106)

- Draw a timeline showing the major events in Henri's life between 1914 and his death in 1928
- What does this chapter reveal about Henri's state of mind?
- 'He's seen more violent death than I hope my little chap at home will ever know' (p.101). Consider the likely effects of such experiences on a young child.
- What possible explanations are there for his repeated running away from shelter and returning to the fighting (p.104)?
- How might this affect him in later life?

6. Imagine that characters from Anthony Hill's book were still alive today.

- Present a TV show in the style of 'This is Your Life' in which these characters come to celebrate Tim Tovell's life.

7. Imagine that you are journalist working for a Women's Magazine.

- Write Henri's story with the headline 'The Beggar who met a Queen'.

8. Read pp 220–223. Write the report written by Wing Commander Coleman.

9. Write the letter from Hec Wilson to Tim Tovell.

10. Conduct an interview with Henri's girlfriend, in which she describes his character.

11. When you look at Henri's experiences, it becomes clear that he is familiar with, or has been placed at some of the most significant actions of the war.

Research one or more of the following and present a report to the class in an appropriate style:

- The Angel of Mons (p.92) <http://awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/angel/doc.htm>
- Hellfire Corner (p. 86) <http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an23816544>
- The Red Baron (p.73)

<http://www.geocities.com/CapeCanaveral/Hangar/5460/redbaron.html>

<http://users.netconnect.com.au/~ianmac/redbaron.html>

- The Battles of Ypres <http://www.worldwar1.com/sf2ypres.htm>  
<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/2354/ypres3.html>

12. Read pp 117 – 119 and prepare a report on the advantages and disadvantages of taking Henri back to Australia.

13. There is a great deal of information available concerning the effects of war on young children.

- Investigate some of the campaigns to limit the impact of war on civilians and children and to prevent the use of child soldiers.

<http://www.warchild.org/>

<http://hrw.org/campaigns/crp/index.htm>

<http://mapw.org.au/childsoldiers/henrik99.htm>

<http://www.spur.asn.au/childwar.htm>  
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/eng-364/index>

14. The role of the Australian Government in incarcerating children of asylum seekers has recently been called into question.

- Conduct an investigation of this issue.

<http://v-i-s-a-s.va.com.au/> is a comprehensive resource list for the group Volunteers in Support of Asylum Seekers

[http://www.hreoc.gov.au/human\\_rights/asylum\\_seekers/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/human_rights/asylum_seekers/index.html) is the home page for the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission that contains extensive listings of resources and reports on issues surrounding asylum seekers.

<http://www.chilout.org/> Children Out Of Detention (ChilOut) is a group of parents and citizens opposed to the mandatory detention of children in Australian immigration detention centres.

- What are the rights of the child under these circumstances.

<http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/k2crc.htm>

15. Views about Child migration have changed remarkably over time. The Australian Government has on occasions been criticised for not apologising to child migrants at the end of WW2. These children were placed in orphanages in the mistaken belief that their parents were dead. There was a long held belief that child migrants were being rescued from their under-privileged environment and given a new chance in Australia, however, in some cases this was a cover for child abuse and cheap labour.

- Read a transcript of the World Today article and present a report on this issue.

<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/s96157.htm>

16. How did the media react to Henri's arrival in Melbourne? Compare this with the attitude of the media today.

- Consider the media coverage of recent conflicts, eg. War in Iraq. How has this coverage changed in recent years?
- What are the expectations of audiences in this regard?
- Does this coverage have the effect of glorifying war?
- Find newspapers for the period preceding the war in Iraq. Examine these articles to explore how they may have influenced their readers.

17. Research the Flu Pandemic of 1919 and present a report to the class. The flu pandemic in 1919 may have killed more people than were killed in combat during the war itself. Over 6000 people died in New South Wales alone.

<http://www.science.org.au/nova/014/014box01.htm> is a good place to start.

<http://www.schools.ash.org.au/immanuel/diseases.htm>

## Non-Fiction Writing

It appears from the evidence of Australian Publishers and Booksellers that fiction writing, particularly in the form of the novel, is much less popular than it was. It seems that society today craves facts.

Consider the success of such book titles as *Angela's Ashes* and *Mao's Last Dancer*. In magazines, see the obsession with lives of celebrities. On television, reality shows have swamped the airwaves.

This is a view that is supported by a number of contemporary writers:

'Publishers will tell you that it is non-fiction that's selling, it's literary non-fiction they want, and readers want.' Drusilla Modesja

'...memoir and biography became an Australian success story, and a new genre emerged that was at first given the rather flaccid name 'life writing'. You could say that narratives of lives – or experience, as Martin Amis calls it – that had been the stalwart of fiction at the beginning of the 20th century had, by the end, moved to non-fiction. We read biography for the good bits, after all – for the fragments of the work and the life that entertain us or tell us something larger about ourselves.' Catherine Lumby, *The Bulletin*

'No matter how polite, no matter how academic, no matter how clinical we want to make our reasons for taking on biographies as a writer or as a reader I think, we are compelled by that tantalising rush of standing with our eye pressed up against a keyhole. We are transfixed by the naughty possibilities of what it is that we might see on the other side, what it is that we never could have imagined or never have known.' Ashley Hay

1. Is it true that today's society is less concerned with the imaginative and creative world?
2. Construct a survey to measure the reading and viewing habits of students' families. Consider a variety of text types eg. books, TV, film, magazines. Do the results confirm the view that modern society is more concerned with fact? Why might this be so?
3. Complete a piece of Non-Fiction writing of your own. Investigate the form of a biography or memoir. Have a look through your family photo album, find an interesting picture and use this as the basis of a true story.

## Further Reading

*Soldier Boy* – Anthony Hill

*Fireshadow* – Anthony Eaton

*Walk in My Shoes* – Alwyn Evans

*Carrie's War* – Nina Bawden (Recently shown on ABC television)

*Boys of Blood and Bone* – Dave Metzenth

*Generals Die in Bed* – Charles Yale Harrison