



TEACHERS' RESOURCES

RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper secondary (years 10 to 12)

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Subjects:** English
- **General capabilities:** Literacy; Ethical Understanding; Personal and Social Capability
- **NSW HSC English** prescribed text

THEMES

- Fear
- Drink driving and its effect on families and communities
- Irony
- Friendship
- Conflict

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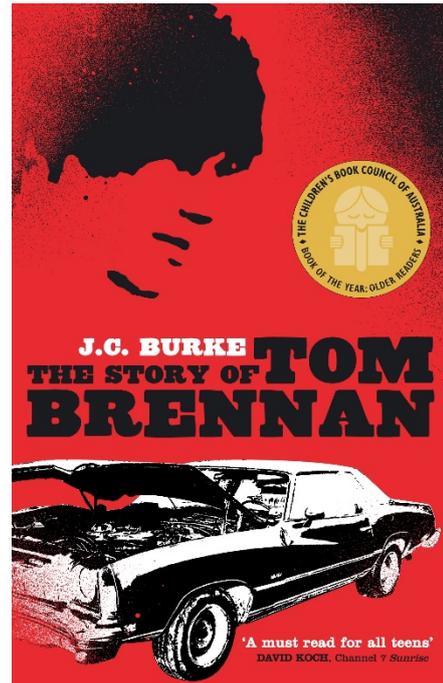
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The Story of Tom Brennan

J. C. Burke

PLOT SUMMARY

How would you and your family cope with a major tragedy? Would you be bitter, argue, cling together? And more importantly, how would you even begin to move on with your life?

The Story of Tom Brennan by J.C. Burke starts with a fatal car accident – a young driver who's had too much to drink goes too fast and in an instant two of his friends are dead and his cousin is left with permanent spinal injuries.

But the book isn't about the car crash; it isn't even about the driver. This is a book about seventeen-year-old Tom Brennan, and how his life changes when his older brother, Daniel, kills two people and paralyses another.

While their cousin Fin lies in hospital, unable to move, Daniel goes to jail and the Brennans are forced to move towns – they've become the victims of a small town's prejudice against the family of the boy they saw as 'an accident waiting to happen'. The residents of Mumbilli are so hostile following the tragedy that they are open in their desire that Daniel receive a severe sentence. 'They're saying that

Daniel's going down and that he deserves everything he gets' (p. 108).

The family must move from Mumbilli because they are no longer welcome in the town – Daniel's actions have affected all their lives. Because they fear the reaction of the township, they leave quietly at 4.30 am. J.C. Burke uses their escape as a prologue, which lures the reader immediately into the story as a sense of mystery develops.

Starting again in a new town and at a new school, how can Tom even begin to rebuild his life when his mother won't get out of bed, his father is struggling to hold the family together, his sister is threatening to spill the family's secret, and he can no longer play rugby with his beloved Mumbilli team?

Tom, who was seventeen at the time of the accident, feels guilt at what has happened, because he was angry with Daniel and elected to walk home instead of going with him in the car. Had he been present, Tom believes he might have been able to persuade Daniel not to drive. His feeling of guilt, however, is juxtaposed with anger at finding himself having to give up a life he thoroughly enjoyed, including leaving his friends and his rugby team. 'I made a deal with myself: I'd stay for two years till Year Twelve was over, max.' (p. 31)

In the year that follows, while the family tries to settle into their new lives in Coghill, Tom develops immensely – from a teenager who feels constant torment, especially at the thought of his cousin Fin's injury, to one who is able to accept the situation and move on. This Herculean feat involves a myriad of other aspects and characters. Tom at first does not seem to appreciate any of his grandmother's efforts, but by the end of the story, he not only recognises the merit in his grandmother, but organises a present for her birthday that he knows she will appreciate. 'Gran looked at me with mist in her eyes, then winked' (p. 268). Moreover, he responds to Chrissy, his girlfriend, in a more mature way instead of running away from romance; and he can finally even respond to Matt, his close friend from Mumbilli who he has felt unable to contact.

It's a long, slow recovery, but there are things that will help bring the real Tom Brennan back: finding out that he can play rugby without his unbeatable partnership with Daniel, running with his Uncle Brendan, the possibility of a climbing trip to the Himalayas, seeing Daniel drag himself back from the brink of suicide, and finding love amidst the chaos –

all these things will help Tom to find a ticket out of the past.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J.C. Burke was born in Sydney in 1965, the fourth of five daughters. With writers for parents, she grew up in a world full of noise, drama and books, and the many colourful characters who came to visit provided her with an endless supply of stories and impersonations.

Burke decided to become a nurse after her mother lost a long battle with cancer. She specialised in the field of Oncology, working in Haematology and Bone Marrow Transplant Units in Australia and the UK.

Since Burke started writing in 1999, she has published a number of acclaimed books for teenagers and young adults, including Children's Book Council Notable Books *White Lies* and *The Red Cardigan*, Aurealis Awards finalist *Nine Letters Long*, *The Story of Tom Brennan*, *Faking Sweet*, *Starfish Sisters*, *Ocean Pearl*, *Pig Boy* and *Pretty Girl*.

The Story of Tom Brennan won the 2006 CBC Book of the Year – Older Readers and the 2006 Australian Family Therapists Award for Children's Literature and it is currently on the NSW HSC syllabus list. *Pig Boy* won the Ned Kelly Award for Best Crime Fiction in 2012.

Jane lives in Sydney with her family.

Visit www.jcburke.com.au for more information about J.C. Burke and her books.

GENRE, STRUCTURE AND STYLE

The Story of Tom Brennan will certainly resonate with teenagers, as there is no doubt they will identify with many of its themes. Under-age drinking, for instance, is a problem today and car accidents causing death feature regularly in the media.

Written in first-person from Tom's perspective, *The Story of Tom Brennan* has an immediacy and rawness that makes the story all the more powerful. Burke captures the emotions of Tom impeccably by her use of the vernacular, which lends reality to his situation. Burke says, '*The Story of Tom Brennan* is Tom's story. To make it real, in order for the reader to hear his pain and confusion as well as his struggle to find a way back, the voice of Tom needed to be strong and clear. The first-person narration was the only way to do this.'



Beginning in the present, when we see Tom at his grandmother's house and hating every minute of his new life, we soon begin to see glimpses of the events in Tom's recent past: the 'sudden death' football party where all the trouble begins, and the terrible, tragic events of that night and days that follow. This use of flashbacks, showing readers only a glimpse at a time of past events, enables J.C. Burke to tell a story within a story, and to link the dramatic events of the past with Tom's present emotional state to increase drama and tension. Burke says, 'To present the story in chronological order seemed heavy-handed. Also, weaving the past into the story in the form of flashbacks meant the reader's experience of meeting Daniel was not so straightforward. Not so "easy" – which was what I wanted to accomplish. It's not until page 138 when the reader finally meets Daniel in "real time". And when they do it is not that simple to feel disdain for him. For Daniel is a broken man.'

Burke set the book after the accident and from Tom's perspective because, she says, 'I didn't want to tell the story from the victims' families' point of view, nor did I want to tell it from Daniel's side either. I wanted to explore how many lives are changed through the actions of another. I wanted to really get into the heart of how a family, a community, a town can be split apart. Part of Tom's journey is being forced to see situations and people as they really are, not as he thought they were. The fragility of family structure is something I understand through my own experiences. And as we're all members of a family perhaps many will recognise the machinations and politics that families run on.'

Burke does not accelerate her plot, leaving time for each character to develop and change. Daniel, who is totally remorseful by the carnage that he has caused and initially is even suicidal, becomes determined to be a better person and becomes a mentor in prison. Aunty Kath (Fin's mother) learns to be forgiving and Tom's mother, Tess, begins to act normally, instead of taking to her bed all day and neglecting her appearance. 'We knew these were big steps for Mum. We didn't want to do anything to spoil it in case she went back to bed and never got out.' (p. 236) Even Tom's sister, Kylie, who was initially not even able to articulate one sentence without vitriol, matures into a helpful family member.

The Brennan family are a close, loving group and have during their sad journey experienced the gamut of emotions that would be expected in a story with a

tragic plot such as this. Consequently, readers should be able to respond easily to the many themes the text contains.

BACKGROUND NOTES ON ALCOHOL ABUSE

Statistics from Australia

Alcohol is widely used by teenagers in Australia. Adolescence is typically a time of experimentation, and around 73 per cent of Australian teenagers try alcohol at least once. Although alcohol is tolerated as a socially acceptable drug, it is responsible for most drug-related deaths in the teenage population.

Alcohol is one of the most commonly used drugs in Australia. Estimates suggest that half of the population over the age of 14 years drinks alcohol at least weekly.

However, it has been estimated that in 2003, 3,430 Australians died due to alcohol use and in 2001 there were 64,782 alcohol-related episodes that needed care in hospital. Both of these statistics represent more than those attributed to illicit drug use.

Car accidents are a leading cause of death for teenagers. In 2006–07, one out of four drivers or riders killed or injured in road accidents in Victoria were over the legal limit for blood alcohol concentration.

Statistics from the USA

Teenage drink driving is a serious concern in the USA. It is the cause of one quarter of all motor vehicle accidents and is the leading cause of death for people aged 15 to 20. It is estimated that one teen is killed every hour in the United States because of teenage drink driving.

Approximately 70 per cent of all teenagers in the USA have consumed alcohol before their twenty-first birthdays. In 1995, it was estimated that ten million drinkers were under the legal drinking age. Underage drinking accounts for 10 to 20 per cent of all alcohol consumption in the United States and fourteen per cent of all fatal motor vehicle accidents involve teenage drink driving.

Teenage drink driving is more likely to occur during night-time hours (between 9 pm and 6 am) when more than one teenager is driving in a motor vehicle. Males are more likely to be involved in teenage drink driving accidents than females, though the



percentage of females involved in teenage drink driving accidents is increasing.

Teenage drink driving poses a threat to everyone on the road. Teenagers put themselves at greater risk of injury when involved in drink driving situations because they take greater risks and exercise less caution. For instance, 75 per cent of teenage drink driving participants were not wearing their seatbelt at the time of an accident.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Prologue

The Brennan family silently drive away from Mumbilli in the early hours of the morning. Although they were once respected in the town, they must depart quietly so that they could leave without fear of abuse from some of the town members who are angry with the family because of the irresponsible action of eldest son Daniel Brennan. There is no doubt that as a family they are feeling ashamed and anguished.

'In a couple of hours they would wake and find us gone, far away, so as not to remind them of their pain and what our family now meant to this town.' (p. 2)

Activities

1. In a small group write the conversation that you think might have taken place among some people in the town when they realised the Brennans had left.
2. Write the conversation that would have taken place in the Brennans' car after they have left Mumbilli behind.

Chapter 1

The family are settling into their grandmother's house, which they are finding intolerable. Gran is devoutly religious and Tom and Kylie resent her interference in their lives. Moreover, because Gran has had to overcome family problems in the past, she has little time for the way Tom's mother, Theresa or Tess, is behaving – Tess has withdrawn from her family and prefers to stay in bed. Gran is also a dreadful cook and the food is difficult to consume. The family is eating an Australia Day lunch. Gran makes Tom say grace and she invites Father Vincent to join them unannounced. This chapter also introduces Tom's prowess at rugby as a focal point, as this sport has always been an

important component in the life of the Brennan family.

'Pray for them, Father Vincent, pray for them – and while you're there, pray for the soul of their son Daniel.' (p. 12)

'You know it's been a while since Bennie's had a half-back with your speed and pass ... Maybe you can teach the boys a thing or two.' (p. 9)

'I hadn't decided if I was playing rugby this year. In fact, I hadn't decided if I was playing ever again. I didn't know if I could without my brother. Things just weren't that simple anymore.' (p. 10)

Activities

1. Tom is keeping a diary. Write his first entry.
2. Using the internet, find out as much as you can about rugby and in particular the role of the half-back.

Chapter 2

Tom and Kylie share their unhappiness at being uprooted from everything they once enjoyed and how much they hate having to live at their grandmother's house. Sadly, they have not been drawn closer by the tragedy. In addition Tom's mother has now become almost catatonic and does not answer Tom when he talks to her. Kylie, Dad, Uncle Brendan, Gran and Tom visit Burger King. Tom is afraid the townspeople will recognise who they are but instead Brendan's friend Shorty only comments on Tom's rugby skills.

In flashback, Tom remembers the day of the Mumbilli team's 'sudden death' match, which they won.

Tom plays a friendly game with Brendan and his friends.

'Tell someone who cares, Tom.' (Kylie, p. 15)

Activities

1. Have a class forum where students can offer reasons why Kylie should react in this way. Is she simply being uncaring, or are there more reasons why she would say this to Tom? How would those in the class feel?



Chapter 3

Both Kylie and Tom are nervous at starting a new school. Although Kylie puts on a tough stance, she nevertheless is deeply affected as she has to hold back her tears. Tom has been allocated to Harvey the football coach's home room and this provides him with an emotional advantage as his dad told him Harvey knows about the accident. There is no doubt that having someone of Tom's rugby calibre at St Bennie's has created a favourable entry into the school, even though Tom is still afraid of public opinion after being so burnt by those in Mumbilli.

In flashback, Tom remembers Daniel's relationship with his girlfriend Claire. There are hints at Daniel's moods: 'There were times I thought the oldies were scared of him or didn't know how to deal with him. So he just got away with it.' (p. 32) Daniel becomes insecure when Claire gets on so well with his cousin Fin. Fin was developing a personality and sporting prowess that was challenging to Daniel. In fact, it was Fin who secured the team's place in the Wattle Shield, whereas Daniel was usually 'tired, hung over and bad tempered' (p. 33)

Tom and Kylie talk as they walk home, but again they become angry at their inability to see each other's point of view.

Sadly Tom's mother continues to show little interest in life around her and in particular to Kylie and Tom.

In flashback, Tom recalls the night of the sudden death party. Daniel and Luke were already drunk when Tom arrived at the party. Tom talks to Claire and learns that she and Daniel have broken up. Claire is trying to tell Tom what has happened, but Tom doesn't understand (Claire broke up with Daniel because of Fin). Daniel becomes highly aggressive, insulting Fin and Tom. Tom is angry and decides to walk home to calm down. The others are all leaving in their cars. One group stops to ask Tom if he wants a lift, but they go back to the hall to pick up a forgotten jacket.

Tom tries to talk to his mother but she is still in bed under the covers and doesn't hear him.

'You see Fin was changing, growing and somehow that altered things between Daniel and him.' (p. 49)

'She didn't see me. How could she under all those covers?' (p. 49)

Activities

1. In a small group, discuss how Daniel might have felt knowing his own ability both with girls and

sport was not as powerful as it had once been. What would you do if you were Daniel?

2. Imagine Tom has written a small letter to his mother which he has left on her pillow. What is in this letter?

Chapter 4

Tom visits Brendan's house – at 'the sheds', his tractor business on the same property. Brendan's friend and co-worker Jonny is there but Brendan is not. We learn that Tom knows Brendan is gay.

Flashback: Tom recalls walking home from the party and Snorter arriving in the car to say 'Dan's stacked' and Tom has to come with him.

Tom and Brendan talk. As Tom goes to check his emails, he remembers the graffiti on their old house in Mumbilli (the last straw, making their father decide to move) and how he had sent a letter to his friend Matt as he didn't have time to say goodbye. Tom receives an email that shows Matt's concern, but before he can respond he overhears a phone message from his Auntie Kath (who is exhausted from visiting Fin in hospital) and he feels too ashamed to send an email. Tom remembers the last time he'd visited Fin and his feelings of uselessness as he looked at Fin's wasted legs. Tom feels there is nothing he can say to Fin.

Kylie appears to be now coping better, as she has made a new friend at school, Brianna Henderson.

'His legs had wasted to long pieces of bone wrapped in shiny skin.' (p. 61)

Activities

1. Students can research quadriplegic injuries on the internet. Having done so, they can focus on Finn's prognosis and as a class discuss how they would feel if they were Fin.

Chapter 5

Brendan takes Tom to the beach while the other adults go to visit Daniel. They discuss the situation of Jonny's family – Tom meets Jonny's sister Chrissy, who is at his school. Jonny's father had had a stroke and died of pneumonia. Brendan mentions to Tom that Daniel is in a bad way. Although being at the beach brings back happy memories of holidays, Tom also remembers an incident where Daniel was mistakenly angry with him and almost drowns him while he was in one of his rages. This occurred when Daniel was just eleven and highlights the fact that Daniel was always prone to sudden anger.



Tom and Brendan visit Fin in hospital. Fin comes across as harsh and admits that he hates the long nights in hospital when he can't shut off his thoughts.

The chapter ends with Tom flashing back to the moment when he had first seen the accident – Daniel's blue Falcon on its side against a tree.

'I'm going to get you, you dobber.' (p. 70)

Activities

1. Tom is really upset by Daniel's behaviour towards him at the beach. Write his diary entry for that day.

Chapter 6

Finally Tom reveals the details of the accident – Daniel running away, Luke and Nicole obviously dead, and Fin trapped in the car, drifting in and out of consciousness. The night of the tragedy clearly shows Fin's selfless attitude – although he is extremely frightened because he has lost all feeling in his limbs, he is still concerned about Daniel and the other passengers. Burke uses simple language to describe the accident, which creates a realism that may otherwise be lost. That Tom has to deal with the imagery of his friends' deaths and Fin's spinal injury, especially as he is now witnessing Fin's changing personality, makes it even harder for him to move on.

At Gran's, Tom's mother Tess tries to make conversation with Tom but her thoughts are obviously with Daniel, who is 'very down' and being moved to a different wing of the prison. Tom also has trouble forgiving Daniel for ruining so many lives.

Kylie also continues to grieve for the life she once had, but she is now using rebellion as a form of coping. She has begun to smoke and even swears. Unlike Tom, though, she is not only able to talk about the accident to others, as she has told her new friend Brianna, but she has also contacted her old best friend Becky.

After talking to Rory at school, Tom meets up with him and some others at the local pool, where he also sees Chrissy again.

'I've been smoking for ages.' (p. 86)

'Don't start preaching to me, Tom!' She jumped off the bed. 'Just because you're so paranoid. People are going to find out sooner or later.' Our foreheads were almost locked together. 'Don't you get that!' She pulled away

and walked to the bedroom door. 'Get out,' she spat. 'I don't want you in here. You're such a downer, and I don't need it!' (pp. 87–88)

'I could see Mum sitting on the bed probably planning her twenty-fifth attempt at coming back to life.' (p. 83)

Activities

1. Discuss whether Kylie's reaction to her situation is the way most teenagers would respond.
2. Discuss how the class would have dealt with Tess. Could Tom have done anything to help her?

Chapter 7

The family are still diligently visiting Daniel and Fin as this is the only way they can be constructive, even though they realise that nothing can be done to alter Daniel's jail sentence and Fin will never recover his mobility. On a personal level, Tom makes a major leap in his own emotional recovery, by ringing up Matt, his former best friend. That even Matt's mother, Mrs O'Rourke, is affectionate towards him is significant. Nevertheless, Tom is still not ready to resume the closeness he once had and feels foolish for phoning.

In flashback, Tom recalls Sunday, the day after the accident, when the police were taking statements. Luke's father was at the police station, saying that they should lock Daniel up and throw away the key. Tom gives his statement on the Monday. Unlike Tom, who is bereft because he knows Daniel was totally responsible for the accident, Tess tries to deflect the blame, even trying to implicate Fin and Claire. Daniel's solicitor, Talbot, recommends a guilty plea. Daniel is tried and sentenced.

'I sat there thinking that must've been one of the stupidest ideas I'd had. What did I really think it was going to do?' (Tom, p. 99)

'So you're sure it was Daniel who was driving?' (Tess, p. 105)

'Tess, your family has been well liked and respected in the community. But memories are short, especially the memories of hurt and angry people who need someone to blame.' (Talbot, p. 107)

Activities

1. You are a psychologist who has been assigned to help Tess in the days following the accident. Write the report you would make on her emotional state.



2. Discuss Talbot's recommendations – should Daniel have pleaded guilty or not guilty?

Chapter 8

Tom's father and Brendan each try in their own way to help Tom regain an interest in football as they know that this would help him to regain an important focus in his life. Joe Brennan talks about the trials enthusiastically, citing Harvey, who believes Tom will be important to the team because of his prowess as a half-back, while Brendan tries to induce Tom to start running with him in order to get fit.

Gran still refuses to pander to any of their emotions and this includes Tom. Instead she insists that a religious protocol be adhered to and this includes prayers at meal times.

Tom takes another step forward by facing one of his fears – he decides that he will visit Daniel.

'I want to see Daniel this weekend.' (p. 115)

Activities

1. In small groups, compare Tom how is emotionally at this stage with how he was at the beginning of the story. Is there any change?

Chapter 9

Although Tom has been selected to play as half-back for St. Benedict's First Fifteen rugby team, he feels no happiness. Once again he plummets into despair as he recognises that this team, and especially playing without Daniel, has no bearing on his old life. The joy he once felt in practicing endlessly with his father and Daniel cannot be replicated, nor can the adulation of the local community.

In flashback: Tom and Kylie have endless counselling sessions. Daniel is very aware of the disaster his reckless action has caused, and the grief he displays in the letter he writes to the parents of Nicole and Luke indicates that Daniel will become a better person. However, the response Daniel receives from Luke's family shows the bitterness and anger that would not only have been felt by those who lost their children, but by others who grieved for them.

Tess continues to blame Claire for the situation, even though she is faultless. Claire leaves Mumbilli to go overseas – she has become another victim of the tragedy.

Daniel is sentenced.

'The back page of the Billi Weekly ran a photo of me throwing a dive pass to Daniel' (p. 120)

'We will leave these words with all of you, the words of a respected citizen of this town, words that seem to represent what so many of us feel – "Daniel Brennan was an accident waiting to happen." What a shame his accident happened to others. Our family will be there in court next week, yet no sentence will be long enough.' (p. 123)

Activities

1. Write the article that would have followed the headline, 'The Legend of the Brennan Brothers'.
2. As a whole class activity, discuss the letter Luke's family wrote to Daniel.
3. Was this a reasonable response?

Chapter 10

Tom visits Daniel in prison. The prison system is a shock to Tom – that he is subjected to a search by the guards horrifies him. On seeing Daniel, however, even this pales into insignificance as he realises how his brother has physically and emotionally changed. Daniel's face, once glowing, is now pale and thin. His eyes are downcast and he walks with a slow, shuffling step. Emotionally Daniel is also bereft as he tries to apologise to Tom for causing so much misery. That Brendan is close to Daniel is clear, as it is he who calms him and helps him refocus his attention onto a situation outside of himself. Nevertheless, because Daniel is still feeling suicidal, he is moved to a peer support facility.

At home, Tom starts running with Brendan and finds out more about why Brendan stayed after his father died. Kylie explodes after Tom unwittingly eats an apple strudel she'd prepared for a school assignment, but their argument is interrupted by the arrival of Aunty Kath, Fin's mum.

'Didn't they realise we weren't like everyone else here?' (p. 130)

'You've got to concentrate on getting through this now, not thinking about what's going to happen later when you're out.' (p. 141)

Activities

1. In a group, discuss whether this was a reasonable assumption by Tom.
2. As a class discuss what you think will happen to Daniel in the future.



Chapter 11

Although Fin is going to be moved to rehabilitation, the fact that he will never have the use of his limbs again hangs over Tom like a black cloud. Because Tom has begun to compare the fate of Daniel and Fin, knowing that Daniel will eventually resume a normal life adds further credence to his despair. Kath occupies herself by cooking furiously, and she is angry and frustrated to observe how Tess is allowed to wallow in misery and neglect her other two children. After a week spent tiptoeing around each other, the family attends church to keep 'The Grandmother' happy. Tom sees Chrissy there; she is singing in the choir.

Tom makes two discoveries: that Brendan and Jonny are together, and that Gran has been keeping scrapbooks of his and Daniel's football careers, ending with the accident.

'Well, Tess,' Kath started, 'I'm sorry about that. But my son can't even turn his neck to see his back.' (p. 154)

Activities

1. In order to understand Fin's injury, the class can research spinal injuries and quadriplegic injuries in particular.

Chapter 12

As Gran talks to Tom in a concerned manner, it becomes apparent that not only does she really care about him, but she is very astute about the behaviour of the rest of the family. However, this peaceful interlude is once again fractured when he learns that Kylie gave a speech where she told a school forum about the car accident. Tom has greatly suffered by the reaction of those in Mumbilli and fears that those in Coghill may react similarly. The incident becomes a turning point in a number of ways as Tom learns that many in Coghill already know of the accident and do not hold a grudge against the whole Brennan family.

Tom again visits Daniel in prison, and he takes a scrapbook he's made of the family and the two boys playing football. They're able to talk normally about the past.

Tom's father announces that someone has made an offer on their old house. Tom asks about his mother and realises he is getting impatient, and that it's a good sign, that he is maybe finally finding his ticket out of the past.

'SHAME ON YOU, BRENNANS, SHAME.' (p. 174)

Activities

1. As a classroom debate, split the class into two so that you can debate whether it is fair for the whole family to be blamed for Daniel's action.

Chapter 13

Tom has been left alone with Gran a great deal as everyone else has been preoccupied with looking after Daniel and Fin and this has brought them closer together. But of even greater consequence, Kylie finally explains to Tom how bad she felt when she realised how her actions in giving the speech had hurt him, and they regain their old friendship.

Fin's nineteenth birthday party, however, once again highlights the depth of the tragedy. Tom still can't talk normally to Fin, and is upset when Fin refers to his friends in Billi.

Daniel hits the wall again and their parents go to be with him at the facility where he is being held.

'Do you want to read it?'

'Read what?'

'My speech.' (p. 189)

Activities

1. As a group discuss Kylie's speech and then write it.

Chapter 14

Tom has begun to recognise a number of issues. He is talking more to Brendan during their runs, and even talks to Chrissy at dinner with Jonny, Chrissy and Brendan. He is establishing a strong relationship with the rest of the rugby team. At the footy camp, Tom is still reluctant to join in because this team can't measure up to his old mates and team at Mumbilli, but after his dad has a word to him, he sees how unfair he's being to the Coghill team. Finally he realises that winning isn't everything, and the new team are 'top blokes' (p. 211). His dad also makes him realise that he has more natural ability at rugby than Daniel had – and how much he owes to Daniel for helping to develop that talent.

'They deserve a fair go, like you did.' (p. 210)



Activities

1. Write a series of journal entries that Tom might have written from the beginning to end of this chapter outlining the different situations he was involved in.

Chapter 15

Although Daniel is improving emotionally, some of his old beliefs still linger, such as that winning is the most important aspect of playing a sport. Brendan has remained constant in his desire to help all the family members, and his invitation to Tom to go to Nepal mean that Tom might not only have something to look forward to, but would remain fit as well. Tom's mother seems to be trying to make an effort to get back to normal. After another dinner at the club, Tom realises that he is falling for Chrissy – another sign that things are looking up for him. Kylie, however, is not doing so well, and she cuts all her hair off.

'Can't see the point,' Daniel frowned. 'I mean, it's all about winning, Isn't it?' (p. 213)

Activities

1. Students can debate the topic 'Winning is the most important aspect of playing sport'.

Chapter 16

Kylie and Tom talk, and in explaining how each felt guilty for the accident occurring because they could have either interfered on the night of the tragedy or not encouraged a situation whereby it became a reason for Daniel to become enraged, they manage to connect with each other again. (We learn that Kylie helped Claire and Fin in their burgeoning relationship.) Not only have Kylie and Tom become closer, but Brendan now feels that he can openly discuss his personal involvement with Jonny with Tom. However, when Tom visits Brendan unexpectedly, it is obvious that emotionally he is putting on a very brave face about Daniel.

'He was on a self-destruct mission.' (p. 229)

Activities

1. In a class discussion students could share ideas on this topic. Do they believe that Daniel's parents should have been also charged for taking a passive resistance towards his behaviour? What could have been done to help Daniel prior to the accident? Are liquor laws the same for underage drinking in all countries?

What influence do friends have when someone is going off the rails?

Chapter 17

Thinking about Brendan, Tom realises that he is on his own journey and he is gaining some perspective on the situation. While they're running, Brendan tells Tom that Chrissy really likes him. Tom suggests they build Gran a chook run for her birthday.

Finally there is to be a rugby match between Mumbilli and Coghill. Matt emails Tom to remind him that they're still mates, proving that a good friendship remains solid. The Coghill team, too, are supportive of Tom and understand how he must feel. However, at the match it is also obvious that there are some in Mumbilli who will never forgive the Brennan family for the tragedy. The lone voice shouting 'killer' and 'Brennan' would certainly have set Tom back again had it not been for Chrissy – although if he'd stayed, the team rallying around Tom would also have shown him that it was only in Mumbilli that the Brennan family were ill-judged. Instead of Tom just agonising over the abusive incident, he rises above it and simply enjoys kissing Chrissy instead.

'The siren rang for full-time, the score still 9-7 but you would've thought we were the winners.' (p. 251)

'I've got to ring him.' (p. 253)

Activities

1. Students are to write a sporting column for a local newspaper describing the match.
2. What would Tom have said to Matt? Working in pairs, write a script of this phone call.

Chapter 18

Now that Tom has started a relationship with Chrissy, he resents having to leave her to visit Fin. Both Kylie and Joe Brennan in particular still feel very committed and have not only been vigilant about visiting Fin, but Joe has also financially supported Kath. Fin's future is of course black and he will be expected to despair from time to time. The strain on Kath is also great. The accident, although producing tragic results, has brought Gran and Tom closer together and in building the chook pen for her, Tom gives her back a past that she thought she had lost forever.



'I think I'll call you Harvey', she crooned. 'Because Saint Harvey was famous for his miracles.' (p. 268)

Activities

1. As a class discuss the concept of one miracle. If the Brennan family could have been given just one miracle, what do you think it would be?

Chapter 19

We see Tom doing normal things – planning his birthday, training with Brendan, planning his birthday. Daniel's imprisonment and Fin's situation are juxtaposed with Tom's freedom, but Tom is able to consider these things without losing his perspective on life. That Daniel will be rehabilitated as a more concerned person is nevertheless apparent. Not only is he now able to be complimentary about Tom's football prowess, but he has also been trying to help another young person involved in a drink driving tragedy to improve emotionally. The Brennan family, not surprisingly, remembering how close they were before the accident, have remained affectionate, supporting and intact. Even the relationship between Gran and Tom, once distant, can be seen as loving by her birthday gift to him of an airline ticket. Knowing Gran and the careful way she considers life, this would have been a present from the heart. Indeed, Tom's relationship with Chrissie is all that is needed to make him a complete Tom Brennan again.

'Have a wonderful trip, Thomas.' (p. 279)

Activities

1. Draw a timeline of the relationship between Gran and Tom, starting from page three. Graph the ups and downs of their relationship.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Tom

Tom, being only seventeen at the beginning of the novel, has all the problems a teenager might face under his extraordinary situation. He had been a popular, successful rugby player and a member of a family that was liked and respected. For him to become an object of hatred would have been complicated and difficult for him to deal with. He is therefore noticeably insecure and is fearful of anyone in his new town knowing about the accident. His grief and even guilt almost monopolises him initially, but Tom does have a strength of character

that pushes him to become fit again and resume rugby.

Tom is also loving towards his family, as can be seen in the way he forgives Kylie when she explains why she gave her speech and how she felt knowing how this had made him suffer. He also has a strong sense of duty and this can be witnessed in his visits to Daniel and Fin. Seeing Daniel utterly destroyed by his foolish actions is very hard for Tom to bear, as he had previously worshipped Daniel. Moreover, it is most unpleasant for him to witness the deterioration in Fin's personality.

His relationship with his grandmother also shows how affectionate Tom is, as there is no doubt that he could barely tolerate his grandmother initially, being so bound up in his own misery. Yet by the end of the novel, as he began to manage his emotions, he sees the kindness in her and, in wanting to do something she would feel was a miracle, he builds her a chicken enclosure so she could have her 'beloved' chooks again.

Tom also matures sexually and his romantic interest in Chrissie is possibly all that is needed for him to leap forward. As he says in the final line of the story, 'that was the morning Tom Brennan came back, forever'.

Daniel

One would not have thought highly of Daniel when we are first introduced to him, an angry nineteen-year-old under the influence of alcohol. Nevertheless, Daniel was once a rugby player of repute, even though he had no love of the game and was only interested in winning. Although Claire, his former girlfriend, had lost interest in him, he was still able to easily attract others. His football ability had lessened, however, owing to his wild lifestyle, and he became to those in Mumbilli 'an accident waiting to happen'. This suggests that many people had clearly determined that his aggressive personality could be dangerous, but perhaps like his parents did little to caution him, fearing his reaction. Even on the night of the tragedy, Tom (also although very disapproving of the way Daniel was behaving) simply walked away instead of taking a firmer stance.

Of course, after the car accident Daniel alters in many ways. He is genuinely sorry for the tragedy he was responsible for and even becomes suicidal. It would be difficult to predict what might happen to Daniel on his release. Perhaps he may have learned



a lesson from the way his behaviour had affected the whole family, but it is unlikely he would play rugby again, knowing that Fin would not be able to. The fact, though, that he was wanting to help another prisoner, Theo, to overcome his suicidal tendency shows a definite improvement and even maturity that was once lacking. That he also said that he would 'make it up to all of you' must also be considered a good omen.

Joe Brennan (Tom's father)

Joe Brennan was not only an excellent coach who spent a great deal of his time in helping his two boys play to the best of their ability, but he was also a sound, thoughtful father. The advice that he gives Tom and Kylie on the journey to their grandmother's house – that they should look on the situation as a challenge to be overcome and not let it fragment the family – is typical of the way he tries to see everything from the other person's point of view. He is genuinely grateful to his mother for making room for them, and unlike other members of the family he is never critical of her poor culinary skills.

Joe is also sympathetic to Tess, his wife – instead of being annoyed by her emotional state he spends a great deal of time just sitting with her. He is tireless in his determination to visit both Fin and Daniel regularly and responds generously to Kath's financial burden that had been brought about by Fin's injury. It is partly because of his role as a father and uncle that the family is able to stick together. Certainly, the affection and respect that is held for him could probably be measured by the way Tom, not wanting to play rugby again, agreed to play for St Bennie's because he doesn't want to let his father down.

Brendan (Tom's uncle)

Brendan is Tom's mother's younger brother. Although he was closer to Daniel in the past, since the accident he has forged a friendship with Tom, even telling him to drop the 'uncle', because he was not going to be forty till the following year. It is through this friendship that Tom has regained his fitness as Brendan pushes him physically to extend himself. Brendan is, however, very sensitive, as Tom witnesses when he finds Brendan crying over a sentimental song titled 'Daniel', but he hides this side of his character well by mounting a practical approach to their dilemma. For instance, he borrows some sheepskin boots to help Fin face the winter from the family of his friend Jonny, with whom he is having a relationship.

Brendan has also tried to fill the void in Tom's life that has been vacated since both parents have been involved in attending to either Fin or Daniel. Although Brendan is deeply concerned over the tragedy that has beset the family, he is still straightforward when it comes to disciplining Tom when he feels he has behaved badly. For instance, he lectures him about not seeing his brother and his lack of communication. Brendan also keeps a strong presence in the lives of Fin and Daniel. Finally, it is Brendan who helps Tom focus on the future by not only including him in his plan to visit Nepal, but encouraging his romance with Chrissie.

Gran

Gran is a seventy-eight-year-old who has opened her house to the Brennan family after the tragedy. Because she is relentless in the way she expects them to observe her religious way of behaving not only at meal times, but in going to church, she creates a feeling of hostility in Tom and Kylie, and they who at first dislike her intensely. Her house has pictures of saints throughout and this gives it a sense of gloom. The saints colour her life, though, as she tells Tom she is going to call her rooster Harvey after Saint Harvey who was famous for his miracles. Getting chooks again is a miracle for Gran, who had to give them up when their pen was knocked down to make way for a shed in which Pa was going to conduct his business.

Gran is also a dreadful cook as she either ruins everything she makes or provides food that the family finds unappetising such as meatloaf. At first Tom and Kylie fail to realise how hard Gran is trying to please them or that her life has been very difficult because of the grandfather's gambling addiction. Gran never complains but stoically adjusts to the situation, even buying dinner that might be more pleasing to Tom. However, she is also straightforward and tries vigilantly to make Tess behave more appropriately. Tom and Kylie do eventually recognise that Gran is a very loving and generous woman and by the end of the novel, they respond to her in a similar manner.

Fin

Fin's greatest regret is that he survived the accident. This is not surprising as he was once a rugby player who was just reaching his peak and now, as a quadriplegic, he would never move properly again. As Kath said, she even had to wipe the tears from his face. Fin was also previously changing physically, growing taller and becoming attractive to girls. In



particular, he and Claire, Daniel's former girlfriend, were just beginning a relationship. Fin was also well liked because he was sensitive to the needs of others, which was apparent on the night of the accident. Even though he was frightened as he had no feeling in his body, he was still concerned about Daniel and the others. His only failing was that he trusted Daniel and showed no discernment on the night of the accident to determine that Daniel was not in a fit condition to drive.

After the accident, although Fin claimed that he did not hate Daniel, the fact that he became more and more sarcastic and hurtful in his conversations with Tom showed that he was deteriorating emotionally. By moving in with Kath into their new home, although this might get him out of a hospital situation, the fact that he could now only be a spectator in life would probably not give him much to look forward to.

Kylie

Kylie has become an angry teenager who has had her life uprooted by the tragedy. She was once part of a family that was not only cohesive, but almost revered in the town where she was living, due to the football prowess of her brothers. Now her family are despised by many and her oldest brother is a target of hatred. The whole situation has left Kylie emotionally fragile and she spends a great part of the story showing resentment and dislike of everything, from living in her grandmother's house to her brother Daniel.

In order to escape her family, who she has become alienated from, Kylie spends a great deal of time at her new friend Brianna's house. She also spends a great deal of time feeling frightened and this has made her tearful. For instance, she is holding back tears when she starts her new school and is also tearful after she visits her friend Becky. The tears stream down her face as she discusses the accident with Matt and she cries as she wraps her arms around Aunty Kath's shoulders after Tom ate her strudel. Of course, Kylie also has a secret as she feels guilty that she had encouraged Fin and Claire in their relationship. Had she not done this, perhaps the accident might have been avoided. Kylie is very young and without a mother to help her, as Tess is still wallowing in her own misery.

During the course of the story, Kylie does return closer to her former state as she becomes close to Tom again and begins to see the kindness in her grandmother. Moreover, her friendship with her

Aunty Kath, which has always been strong, becomes an important focus in her life as she and Kath share some of the duties that surround Fin. However, her family are also concerned that she is showing too much concern for Fin – perhaps her sense of guilt has not allowed her to grow as much as Tom has.

Kath (Tom's aunt, Fin's mother)

Kath is a devoted mother and finds it difficult to forgive Daniel for the dreadful injury her son Fin has sustained because of Daniel's irresponsible behaviour. Kath has already lost her husband, which would make it even harder for her not to become bitter. She too has decided to leave Mumbilli and resettle elsewhere, because Fin needs better facilities than Mumbilli can provide.

Kath, who would have been a proud mother before the accident, does have a personality change. Most of her venom is targeted at Tess, however, who has no concept of the despair that Kath faces daily. Fin is now like a baby because of his spinal injury and is unable to do anything for himself. Indeed the air becomes icy when Kath and Tess are near each other, and Kath is often very sharp in the way she speaks to Tess. For instance, she has no trouble in pointing out to Tess that although Daniel might have to watch his back in jail, Fin can't even turn his head to see his back.

However, Kath is not only a dedicated mother, but she is also an important component in Kylie's life. She has been a surrogate mother to her owing to Tess' neglect. Consequently it is to Tess that Kylie turns to for help when Tom has eaten her strudel. This was meant to be a school project and because Tess is an excellent cook, she is able to replicate this for Kylie in time for her to have it assessed.

Chrissie

Chrissie Tulake is the sister of Jonny, Brendan's partner. She is a beautiful girl and is desired by most of St Bennie's football team. Chrissie is a stable person who does not flirt easily. She is very considerate of others and becomes at first a very good friend to Tom, before this situation blossoms into a relationship. She is there to comfort him after he is heckled at the football match when St Bennie's played St John's, and she encourages him to visit Fin for a week at Aralen, even though it means they will be apart. Chrissie seems to be very understanding and it is through her persistence that the relationship with Tom goes from friendship to a meaningful relationship.



Tess

There is no doubt that Tess was once a loving and interested mother. However, she always appeared to favour Daniel and this has impacted on her behaviour since the tragedy. Tess has become very neglectful of the rest of the family and has succumbed to deep depression. She shows no interest in anyone other than Daniel and this has extended not only to her own children, but to Fin as well. Tess has become so catatonic that even her own appearance and health have deteriorated to a point of great concern. Tess does finally make small steps to an improvement in her mental health, and perhaps after Daniel is released, she may resume a better maternal role towards her whole family.

KEY QUOTES

1. *'... past the ugly words that told us we were no longer wanted'* (p. 1) Many of those in Mumbilli are extremely angry by Daniel's irresponsible behaviour. Consequently they have projected their hostility towards the rest of the Brennan family by writing graffiti on their garage.
2. *'And God forgive Daniel.'* (p. 5) The Brennans' grandmother insists on acknowledging the truth of the situation as she is religious and will not lie. Daniel in her eyes has been responsible for a great tragedy and needs forgiveness, not a blessing.
3. *'Tell someone who cares, Tom'* (p. 15) Kylie has no sympathy at this stage for her brother Daniel. She refuses to consider how he might be feeling as she is so angry with him.
4. *'Mumbilli had only a Kentucky Fried, but it was a top one'* (p. 17) Tom is showing how he misses Mumbilli as he compares it to Coghill.
5. *'If Daniel'd been able to look at it with a level head he would've seen that maybe it was Claire who liked Fin, not the other way around. But then maybe Daniel did see that and maybe that's the exact thing he couldn't handle.'* (p. 33) Daniel was becoming extremely jealous of his cousin Fin. Not only was Fin was becoming more physically attractive, but he was beginning to be noticed for his rugby prowess.
6. *'She didn't see me. How could she under all those covers?'* (p. 49) Tom was very disappointed that his mother was not even interested to hear how his first day at St Bennie's went.
7. *'Now they lay there on the bed, useless, and that was something I just couldn't wrap my head around.'* (p. 61) Tom was comparing the present state of Fin's legs to the legs that had been responsible for kicking a ball that had resulted in a victory for his rugby team and was dismayed.
8. *'You know what happens to dobbers?'* (p. 70) Daniel was going to punish Tom because he mistakenly believed Tom deliberately got him into trouble. Even though Daniel was only eleven, he began to show a lack of control over his emotions that was evident in later life.
9. *'I don't want you in here. You're such a downer, and I don't need it!'* (p. 88) Kylie has tried to move on by making a new friend Brianna, but Tom is concerned that she has been too open with her.
10. *'Thought maybe your gran had pigeon service.'* (p. 97) Matt, Tom's friend is being sarcastic, as Tom has not replied to his emails.
11. *'That they, that they – should lock him up and throw away the key.'* (p. 102) Luke's father was expressing a sentiment about Daniel's sentence that was being echoed by many in Mumbilli.
12. *'That's all right,' she whispered. 'How about you saying grace tonight?'* (p. 116) In wanting Tom to say grace, Gran is may be hoping that religion will give comfort in the say way it has been of help to her.
13. *'And if you'd asked me then what I thought, I would've said nothing or no one could take that away from us.'* (p. 120) Tom has just finished reading the back page of the Billi Weekly, which had a headline that praised the rugby skills of the Brennan brothers; he is experiencing the unpredictability of life.
14. *'Like I said, that was a low point.'* (p. 124) Gran has just finished reading the letter Luke's family wrote to Daniel and the Brennan family. It is clear they only wish Daniel to be severely punished and will never forgive him for the tragedy he has caused.
15. *'Give him my love,' she whispered. 'Tell him I'm always thinking of him.'* (p. 132) Sadly, that's all Tess is thinking of as she has totally neglected her other family members.
16. *'Didn't they realise we weren't like everyone else here?'* (p. 134) Tom thought because they were a respectable family they should not be



- considered in the same way as others who were relatives of criminals. He hadn't accepted that Daniel was also a criminal.
17. *'Tom,' he swallowed. 'I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry you had to leave the Billi. I'm so, so sorry.'* (p. 139) Daniel is definitely sorry and perhaps this could be a sign that he will change when he is released.
 18. *'You could be Fin'* (p. 148) Kylie is just pointing out to Tom that no matter how bad things are for everyone else, Fin's situation is the most appalling.
 19. *'Fair?' Kath yelled. 'Fair!'* (p. 154) Kath has finally released some of the bitterness she feels over the situation.
 20. *"One small step for man. One giant leap for mankind."* *'Cause today, for my family, that's what it was like.* (p. 157) Tom was stating how they felt when Tess got out of bed. This might be the beginning of her emotional recovery.
 21. *'You know, today I'm going to the Hill Deli to buy one of their home-made lasagnes. I hear they're delicious.'* (p. 167) Gran is genuinely trying to get close to Tom and to understand him. This is very generous of her as she is an elderly woman who has opened her house to the Brennan family.
 22. *'At least she like watching The Footy Show. We'd have a good laugh over that. Sometimes she wasn't too bad.'* (p. 185) Tom is finally beginning to get closer to his grandmother as the gap between them lessens.
 23. *'There was tension between Kath and Mum. It was like the air went icy when they were near each other.'* (p. 193) Kath bitterly resents Daniel because of Fin's injury, while Tess can only lament Daniel being in jail. Neither is able to see how the other is in anguish.
 24. *'Can't see the point,' Daniel frowned. 'I mean, it's all about winning. Isn't it?'* (p. 213) The difference in the attitude between the St Bennie's team, who simply want to play their best, and Daniel, who sees rugby as only being good if you can win, is obvious here. Tom has also begun to see that winning is not everything.
 25. *'The accident,' he sighed. 'How could I go?'* (p. 241) Brendan has just explained how the accident even altered his life as he could no longer go away with Jonny, but had to stay and help the family in Coghill.
 26. *'I mean, you know Jonny and I are – together?'* (p. 233) Brendan has just confided in Tom that he has a relationship with Jonny as he feels that he would like to be more than just an uncle to Tom. It is here that one realises that Brendan is trying to establish with Tom the same friendship he had with Daniel.
 27. *'That was the morning we swam and loved each other and that was the morning Tom Brennan came back, forever.'* (p. 283) Tom is articulating how the sexual relationship with Chrissie, which had now been fulfilled, was the final way in which he became his old self again. Prior to this, he was filled with anxiety and could not let go of the situation he found himself in after the tragedy. It is symbolic of the greater maturity he has developed over the course of the story.

THEMES

Fear

Fear is a dominant theme in this book as it affects so many of the characters. Tom is initially frightened when he arrives at the scene of the accident. He knows that two of his friends are strangely quiet and therefore likely dead, but of even greater importance at the time, Fin has no feeling in his limbs (p. 82). Fin naturally panics knowing he could not move and is incredibly fearful throughout the night.

After the accident and the family's move to a different town, Tom is afraid of the reaction of those in Coghill because of the anger generated towards the family by many in Mumbilli (p. 18). His concern and fear over past hostilities not only makes him fearful of starting his new school, (p. 28), but this emotion even makes him even suspicious of the pool attendant, who was merely joking about not letting him in because he was short of the gate fee (p. 92).

Tom is also frightened that his mother will not get out of bed again and this may be seen in the way she is humoured over her omelette preparation (p. 236).

Joe Brennan is in fear of those who live in Mumbilli because of the hostility that has been generated towards his family, which is why he organises their retreat from the town in the early hours of the morning (p. 58). Both he and Tess are also fearful when they consider Daniel's jail term as they are worried that he might be attacked by others in jail (p. 107).



Drink driving and its effects on families and communities

The result of Daniel driving while under the influence of alcohol, and the tragedy that ensued because of his reckless behaviour, is of course the platform from which the story evolves. Daniel has been not only responsible for two young people dying, but for the spinal injury his popular and talented cousin Fin received. This has led to his own family being uprooted from their comfortable existence in Mumbilli (p. 1), because of the intense hostility the accident created. It has also led to incredible anguish and tension within his own family (p. 28). The sentence hanging over the family may even be considered a greater burden than Daniel's jail sentence, even though he has become suicidal while there, as they have to live each day knowing the problem he has caused, a crisis that can never be fixed. Nicole and Luke cannot be revived and Fin will never have a normal life again. One cannot imagine how his mother Kath would feel knowing her only son, a former athlete with great skill, would be confined to a wheelchair or a bed for the rest of his life. Indeed, the full horror of Daniel's reckless driving can probably be summed up in the letter sent to the Brennan family by Luke's parents. Their cold hatred of Daniel is probably fair under the circumstances, as even his jail sentence in their eyes is of course much too short (p. 123).

Family relationships and how different people deal with crisis

The manner in which the various members of the Brennan family relate to each other, as well as to the horrible situation they are faced with because of Daniel's reckless and irresponsible behaviour, are an important part of this text. They remain a united family, even though they are faced with an extremely complex situation. Joe Brennan, the father, is pulled in many directions but seems to be able to keep a calm countenance at all times. He visits Daniel and Fin on a regular basis, which must be very difficult for him (p. 196). He also tries to keep Tom interested in rugby (p. 205), and is very supportive of his wife Tess, who has become almost catatonic from her grief. Not only that, he is also unfailingly polite to his mother, who irritates Tom, Kylie and Kath. Gran continues to act as though each member should simply adjust to the situation and move on (p. 64).

Brendan is also very supportive to everyone in the family. He too visits both Daniel and Fin regularly.

Indeed it is Brendan who helps Tom recuperate emotionally, as he not only helps him becoming interested in training again (p. 112), but treats him like a close friend. Because of Brendan, Tom does indeed become fit and has a future that includes playing a high standard of rugby, romance (p. 238) and a holiday in Nepal. Brendan is extremely stoic and in order to help keep the family together he hides his own feelings of despair (p. 237).

Gran, although abrasive, because of her desire to keep a sense of normality in her house and even insisting on a religious input (p. 14), gives the Brennan family an area that is in its own way a haven. Her perseverance finally pays off because even Tom ultimately recognises the love in her (p. 279).

Even though Tom feels despairing after Daniel's foolish and irresponsible act, he still tries to remain close to all members of his family (p. 273), although he chooses not to talk about the accident if he can help it, and he doesn't want others to know about what happened. This is made difficult by Kylie's chaotic behaviour in giving her speech and his mother's disinterest in anything but Daniel.

Although Kylie appears to be inconsiderate of others and not relating to the problems the family faces, she finally shows her true feelings of family love when she explains to Tom how upset she was when she realised how much she had hurt him by her speech. Moreover, she responds to Fin's request to help him get settled in his new home in a most selfless way (p. 263).

For Kath, the most difficult task would have been to remain close to the family after Fin's injury.

The fact that they all remained close, even despite their different ways of dealing with the crisis, demonstrates the unique way in which this family relate to each other. Their tragedy may have left another family fragmented.

Friendship

Friendship is a recurring theme in this novel. Immediately following the accident, Tom and Matt sustain their friendship despite many in Mumbilli being overtly hostile to the Brennan family (p. 258). Although Tom finds it difficult to talk to Matt after their move, Matt remains supportive and understands why Tom behaves the way he does.

The St Bennie's football team rally around Tom, knowing how hard it will be for him to face his old



team St John's. Tom's new friends at school support him without needing to spell out their actions – for instance, keeping him company and protecting him from gossip after his sister makes a speech about everything that has happened. Tom, however, takes a while to see them as friends, since to begin with he measures everyone he meets against his previous friends and easy life in Mumbilli, and finds those in Coghill lacking.

Brendan not only demonstrates a strong bond of friendship towards his whole family, but in particular to Tom by getting him fit again. Brendan knows that once Tom can take his mind off the tragedy, he might begin to emotionally heal. Tom and Gran also find friendship in their relationship, after they are frequently left alone in each other's company (p. 185).

Tom and Kylie, who had always enjoyed a sibling friendship, once again regain this status after she explains to Tom how desperate she felt when she gave her speech to the school forum. Tom also extends a hand of friendship once again to Daniel when he gives him the scrapbook he has made (p. 178).

Chrissie demonstrates friendship towards Tom, when she shows concern after Kylie's speech and after he is heckled at the rugby match (p. 183). Their relationship would become more intense than friendship ultimately, but without her friendship, it would not have progressed.

The relatively new relationship between Kylie and Brianna is also an important element in this tragedy, as it gives Kylie a haven to retreat to when life becomes intolerable for her at Gran's house.

Irony

Irony may be seen in many situations throughout the novel. For instance:

- Fin, who was becoming physically attractive to the opposite sex and thus caused Daniel to become jealous, is now wasting away with spinal injuries.
- Daniel's parents did nothing to control his behaviour fearing his volatile reaction, but must now suffer his depression and the results of his impetuous behaviour.
- Daniel writes a letter of remorse to the families of the victims of the accident, but the letter he receives in return causes Daniel and his family even more pain.

- The family expects that Daniel's involvement in team sport might make the judge lenient towards him, but instead the judge says that 'Being a team player, you should have known better' (p. 128).
- Gran, who believed that she would never have her beloved 'chooks' again after her husband's death, has had this part of her life restored because of the tragedy.
- Gran also has a close bond with Tom and Kylie, which previously was nonexistent.
- Tom, who reluctantly moved Coghill because of the accident, has met Chrissie, with whom he has begun a serious relationship.
- Daniel and Fin's birthdays are ten days apart, and although before the accident Daniel always had more attention on his birthday, after the accident it is Fin who the family wants to pay attention to.
- It is also ironic that a family such as the Brennans, who were previously held in high esteem by many in Mumbilli, should suffer hostility because of the actions of one.

Conflict

Conflict is a theme that naturally permeates this text because of the tragic circumstances of the story. The most obvious is the conflict between many in Mumbilli, who hold a grudge against the Brennan family and in particular Daniel. They would like to see Daniel locked up forever and cannot let their hostility lessen even a year later, as demonstrated at the rugby match when someone in the crowd referred to Daniel as a 'killer'.

Then, on a more personal level, there is the conflict between Tom and Kylie as they are drawn apart after they arrive in Coghill. Each feels a guilt they cannot at first share.

Tess and Kath, who are dominated by the problems facing their own sons, also conflict with each other, since Kath faces the greater burden in looking after Fin for the rest of her life, yet it is Tess who is unable to cope and breaks down.

There is also inner conflict as Tom feels guilty over his inaction on the night of the accident, and Kylie feels guilty because of her involvement in the budding romance of Fin and Claire. Daniel also faces internal conflict as he recognises the full impact of his behaviour. He has altered the lives of so many: the families who have lost children, his own family



and his cousin, who is now paralysed. Fin, too, faces internal conflict as he is torn between the thoughtful person he once was and the bitter, harsh person he is becoming.

On the sporting field there is conflict between the two ideas of 'winning is everything' and 'the team is the most important'. There is also the conflict between St Bennie's and St John's, which is personally significant for Tom.

MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS

Black

Darkness or black is used throughout the novel to depict a state of despair. The family fled Mumbilli close to dawn when only the silhouettes of the houses could be seen. Tom, who does not like living at his grandmother's house, surveys his room only to see that it is brown and dark. While remembering how they once were and comparing this to his present state, Tom slips into a long black tunnel. A black curtain also descended over Tom when Chrissie asked him how his nonexistent grandfather was feeling, knowing that the boots she gave him were really for Fin. When discussing Daniel, his moods are also referred to as being dark and in order to show how vulnerable Kylie is, she is described as having black make-up all over her eyes.

Water

Water or an area where one can swim is used on many occasions to generally show a positive outcome in this story. Kylie is told to have a shower by Kath in order to cool off when she is upset. Tom is caught in the shower by Chrissie, just after he realises that he is sexually interested in her. It is at the pool that Tom first goes out with his new friends from school, and he feels free and light when he jumps into the pool. It is at the pool that he sees Chrissie again. Finally it is at the river when Tom believes he came back. Also, Kath and Fin move closer to the beach, perhaps with hope for a brighter future for Fin. However, it was also while Daniel and Tom were swimming when they were younger that Daniel pushed his head under the water, holding it there in anger. Perhaps this was a sign that Daniel needed discipline to control this aspect in his personality.

'Sudden death'

The 'sudden death' match that St John's has to play in order to have a place at the final for the Wattle

Shield takes on a new significance after the accident. For Tom the phrase is linked forever with what happened, and the irony is not lost on him.

Driving

Driving is also an important motif. It is Daniel's drink driving that causes the tragedy that follows; the book opens with the Brennan family driving quietly out of town while no-one is watching; after they leave their weekends are spent driving to visit either Daniel or Fin.

Rugby

Rugby is the lynchpin that holds many of the stories together. It certainly symbolises the prestige that was accorded to the Brennan brothers in Mumbilli because of their football prowess. It also symbolises the friendships that Tom acquires in Coghill because once again he is an important member of a Rugby team. Rugby also symbolises fear when Tom knows he has to play against a team from Mumbilli.

Running

When Tom takes up running with Brendan, it is a positive step. It gives the two time to talk, it improves Tom's fitness levels and helps him get back to rugby again, and it gives him a new goal: to get fit enough to go to Nepal. This contrasts against the fact that the family might be seen to be running away from their problems in Mumbilli, or that Tom is running away from his problems by not wanting to talk to anyone about what has happened.

Hills and mountains

Hills symbolise Tom's struggle and his journey. The hill near his Gran's place is steep – more like a mountain. Gran calls it 'Ascension Hill' and 'reckoned it lead all the way to heaven' (p. 112), which is consistent with her religious world view. Daniel hates climbing hills and would complain the whole way if made to walk up one, which makes the family name the hill near their home in Mumbilli 'Daniel's Whine'. This is symbolic of how Daniel gets everything easily despite his bad behaviour – no-one is able to stand up to him. On the other hand, Tom sees the steep hill as a challenge, and through his running with Brendan, he becomes better at reaching its peak. Ultimately he and Brendan are going to visit Nepal and climb world-famous mountains, showing how far Tom has come in his journey, to see this future for himself.



Names

The family in the book are always conscious of having the name 'Brennan'. Before the accident, it symbolises their status in the town – the Brennans were respected, and their boys were getting the name even more well known because of their prowess on the rugby field.

After the accident, however, it becomes a name that they hate, since everyone in Mumbilli associates the name Brennan with Daniel. Even more than a year later the words 'killer' and 'Brennan' are heard at the rugby game Tom is playing in. Their name has been defiled in graffiti saying 'Shame on you, Brennans' (p. 174). Kylie hates it: 'I don't want to be Kylie Brennan ... Kylie anyone, but not Kylie Brennan' (p. 231). Although Tom initially agreed, and wished his name wasn't so well known, since he is always afraid someone will recognise it, he is able to say to Kylie, 'Course you will [get there]. You're a Brennan' (p. 231). And ultimately he feels comfortable enough with his name to say 'that was the morning Tom Brennan came back, forever' (p. 283).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Some of the themes in *The Story of Tom Brennan* are friendship, family relationships, drink driving and fear. Choose one of the themes and show how the text illustrates this.
2. You are a reporter who has arrived on the scene of the accident. Write an article on under-age alcohol abuse and drink driving.
3. You are the lawyer either defending or prosecuting Daniel for his involvement in the accident. Write your final address to the jury.
4. Imagine you are a television producer and have been asked to serialise this novel. Using any part of the story, write one of the episodes.
5. How does this novel explore how irresponsibility can affect others?
6. Does Daniel have any merit at all?
7. How important is it to this text to have the story narrated by Tom?
8. There is a great deal of conflict in this story. How does conflict manifest itself?
9. 'I mean, you know Jonny and I are – together?' Why was it important for Brendan to tell Tom that he and Jonny were having a relationship? Discuss.
10. 'But that was the morning we swam and loved each and that was the morning Tom Brennan came back, forever.' Do you think it is realistic of Tom to believe that the relationship he has begun with Chrissie will continue to obliterate the sense of tragedy he has been living with? Discuss.
11. The subject of *The Story of Tom Brennan* ties in with a number of current news issues, such as drink driving, acceptable blood alcohol levels, the age teenagers can get their driving licences, and tax levels on alcohol. Could changes to the law have prevented Daniel's accident? Why or why not?
12. Tom's sister, Kylie, describes the way the Mumbilli townspeople treated the Brennan family (such as spitting at them, painting graffiti on their house) as 'terrorism'. Do you agree?
13. Each member of the Brennan family deals with their grief and shock in a different way – Tom's mother won't get out of bed, his sister gets angry, and Tom wants to avoid talking about what's happened. What would be some more effective coping mechanisms? Would your suggestions be different for each person?
14. Was Daniel 'an accident waiting to happen'? Could the accident have been prevented? For example: would Daniel have benefited from counselling to reduce his aggression? Should his friends have stopped him from driving that night? Was Daniel's rugby fame within the Mumbilli community a factor in his attitudes and the way the town treated him?
15. One of the tragedies in this story is that Daniel's parents often resisted discipline as they feared how Daniel would react. Yet ultimately the consequences of Daniel's uncontrolled behaviour were destructive far beyond his parent's fears. This example of 'tragic irony' is often used in books. What does it tell us about real life?
16. Explore the different positions of siblings in families (Daniel is the eldest, Tom is in the middle and Kylie, the only girl, is the youngest) and how this influences the way a family functions and relates. Do Joe or Tess Brennan have a 'favourite' child?
17. Explore the idea that physical exercise (such as Tom's running) can also improve your mental state.



18. Tom is devastated when Kylie tells everyone the family's secret, but Brendan says there's a difference between people's attitudes in Mumbilli and Coghill because Coghill is a larger town. What are the advantages and disadvantages to living in a small country town, or a larger town or city?
 19. Tom is disappointed to be playing rugby with St Bennie's because they're not as skilled or successful as his previous Mumbilli team. Is winning everything, or is there more to sport than winning?
 20. J.C. Burke chose to explore who Daniel is from a distance as she felt it was more powerful this way. Are the things we find disturbing in a character often the things we see in ourselves?
- Create a board game like Snakes and Ladders that mirrors the events as they take place in the story.
 - Work with a partner to create a dramatic reading of a key scene in the text.
 - Write any part of the story from Kath's point of view.
 - You are Daniel's solicitor. What would he have said to Joe and Tess Brennan before and after Daniel's appearance at court?
 - Based on evidence you have gauged about Tom from your reading of this book, how do you perceive his future?
 - How many types of conflict can you find in this text? What are they?

ACTIVITIES

Essay questions

See Worksheet 1 attached for a choice of essay questions.

Oral assignments

See Worksheet 2 attached for class talk topics.

Short written responses

See Worksheet 3 attached for a choice of short response questions.

Extension work

These are ideas for students who have completed the main task and would like the benefit of extension.

- Work with a small group to produce a sequence of scenes that can be enacted for the class.
- Act as one of the characters. Have the class interview you about your life.
- Create a timeline of events as they take place.
- Write an account of the situation from Kylie's point of view.
- Create a digital collage combining visuals and text using Word or PowerPoint to reflect the themes and issues of the story.
- Compare and contrast any two characters from the novel. Present your findings in a graph form.



WORKSHEET 1: Essay questions

Students are to choose two essays, one from Part A and one from Part B, and write a response of 800–1200 words on each.

Part A

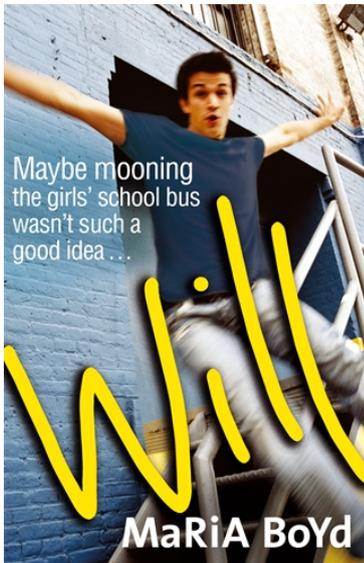
1. In order to understand Daniel better, write a series of diary extracts to show what he is really feeling in the key scenes where he enters the story.
2. Write Tom's account of how the Brennan family has developed after Daniel has been released from prison.
3. Imagine Tom and Chrissie visit Luke's family. Write a story about this.
4. Write another creative story that involves drink driving and teenagers.
5. You were the doctor on duty the night Fin was admitted to hospital. Write your report explaining the psychological and physical condition of Fin.
6. Write a feature article for a newspaper titled, 'Revenge doesn't produce anything'.

Part B

1. You can't alter the past. Only when individuals move on can they achieve happiness. Discuss this in relation to your understanding of *The Story of Tom Brennan*.
2. Is Daniel the only one to blame in this story? Discuss.
3. The family is important in showing how a tragedy, such as the one that happened to the Brennan family, can have a number of ramifications. Is this your understanding of the text?
4. Many in Mumbilli believed that Daniel's sentence was too short. Would a longer jail sentence achieve justice? Discuss.
5. Tess is the weak link in this story. She failed on many levels. Do you agree?
6. It is impossible to avoid conflict in life, but this tragedy was preventable. Do you agree?



FURTHER READING FROM PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA



Will

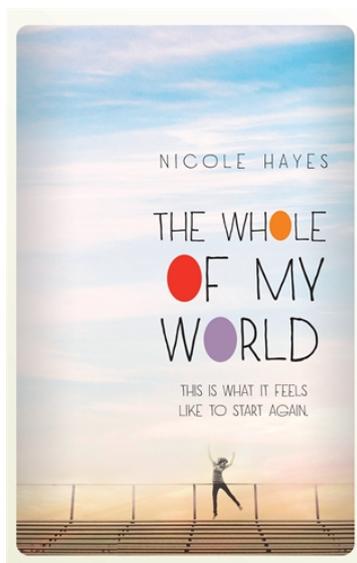
by Maria Boyd

Why this story? 'This book is to boys what Looking for Alibrandi was to girls. Highly recommended.' Kids' Reading Guide

Will is in trouble and everyone's worried. They reckon it's because of what happened six months ago. He doesn't know what they're on about.

The latest incident lands him in Deputy Waddlehead's office. His school career is over. That is, until his English teacher fixes it so he gets a punishment ten thousand times worse than expulsion – helping out with the school musical.

This is where the real trouble starts.

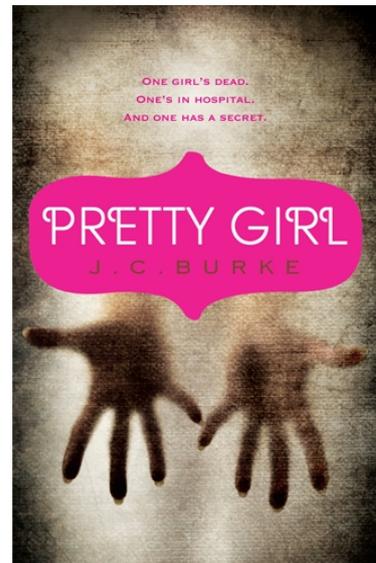


The Whole of My World

by Nicole Hayes

Why this story? Another riveting story about football, love, loss, and secrets that won't stay hidden.

Desperate to escape her grieving father and harbouring her own terrible secret, Shelley disappears into the intoxicating world of Aussie Rules football. Joining a motley crew of footy tragics – and, best of all, making friends with one of the star players – Shelley finds somewhere to belong. Finally she's winning. So why don't her friends get it? Josh, who she's known all her life, but who she can barely look at anymore because of the memories of that fateful day. Tara, whose cold silences Shelley can't understand. Everyone thinks there's something more going on between Shelley and Mick. But there isn't – is there?



Pretty Girl

by J.C. Burke

Why this story? J.C. Burke's psychological thriller delves into what happens to friendships between high school and starting university.

Paige, Sarah, Jess and Tallulah were best friends at school. Now they've begun university, but it's not turning out like it's meant to. Tallulah's partying too hard, Jess is being secretive, Paige is embarrassing herself with an unrequited crush, and Sarah's struggling to keep up with her wealthier friends.

One night, Sarah saves Paige from drowning in the university swimming pool. Paige can't remember why she was there, and Sarah's too afraid to say what she thought she saw.

As Paige starts to piece together her memories, the most terrifying question becomes clear: could it happen again?



ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QTY	TOTAL
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Will	Maria Boyd	9781741662108	10-12	\$19.99		
The Whole of My World	Nicole Hayes	9781742758602	10-12	\$18.99		
Pretty Girl	J. C. Burke	9781741663136	10-12	\$19.99		
TOTAL						

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