**ASO READER’S NOTES**

**Title: I Was Only Nineteen  
Author: John Schumann, illustrated by Craig Smith  
Publisher: Allen & Unwin  
Price: $24.99  
ISBN: 9781743317235  
Publication Date: March 2014  
Audience: 8-12  
Reader: Carolyn Walsh, Allen & Unwin**

**Synopsis:**

*This is the first time that Redgum’s iconic 1983 song has been published as a stand-alone book.*

*I Was Only Nineteen* is a first-person narrative account of an Australian soldier’s experience in the Vietnam War. At nineteen, our unnamed narrator volunteers for service and is sent overseas. Once in Vietnam, he experiences combat and the devastating effects of war: from the tension of crawling through jungle to the chaos of an exploding landmine, from watching one of his best mates die to being shot in the back and not even realising he has been hurt. While our narrator survives, his experiences, like those for so many of his mates, are life-changing and are reflected in the refrain, ‘God help me, I was only nineteen’.

With the Anzac centenary celebration and commemorations planned for 2014-2018 ( <http://www.anzaccentenary.gov.au/)> there will be renewed demand for books like this: books for young people to help them understand the realities and consequences of war.

**Style:**

The 1983 Redgum song *I Was Only 19* (and this picture book) tells a tragic, highly personal story with warmth, directness and sparse use of rhyme. Its language is often that of the soldiers (‘Frankie kicked a mine’), while the phrase ‘the Channel Seven chopper’ grounds it in contemporary Australia, joining the world of the listener/reader with that of the protagonist.

Craig Smith’s watercolour illustrations beautifully capture the innocence and youth of the soldiers on parade and later at war, enhancing the underlying theme of the song.

His use of green tints on every spread but one emphasises the military theme of the story and the haunting nature of the jungle in which so much of the war was fought. The exception to this is the monochrome spread of the marching troops in Townsville, capturing in ‘black and white’ the last moments of the soldiers’ innocence – and perhaps youthful hopefulness – before they sail to war.

**Author Motivation:**

John Schumann didn’t go to war, but saw many of his friends go and come back changed, traumatised. He had long wanted to write a song that reflected their experiences, but knew that he needed to understand what had happened first. But, according to him, getting a Vietnam veteran to talk about the war was very hard. ‘Approach a group of veterans having a drink and a yarn and they’d clam up as soon as you drew near,’ he said. ‘For my part, I was disinclined to write a song this important on the basis of some media reports and my imagination.’

Things changed in late 1981. ‘I met Denny, the woman who was to become my wife, at a dinner party in Adelaide. As our relationship unfolded, we swapped family histories and stories. I discovered that her brother, Mick, had been in Vietnam. Further, he’d been involved in a serious mine incident in 1969 in which a couple of his mates were killed and a number seriously injured. In time I met Denny’s family, including Mick. He and I seemed to get along pretty well but I avoided the issue of his Vietnam service until one night after a Redgum concert…I confided in him my desire to write a song about Vietnam veterans and, on a whim, I asked Mick if he’d be prepared to talk to me and help with some of the detail.’

Schumann explains that it was some weeks later that he and Mick sat down. ‘It was a long night. Mick brought with him a carton of beer and a small cardboard box containing his Vietnam memorabilia – photographs, slides, a couple of badges, a map and a few other bits and pieces. We watched the slides, looked at the photos, drank the beer and talked; or rather, I interviewed him. Mick’s story was graphic enough, all right, but I pushed him for detail – sights, sounds, smells, feelings. Denny had set up her cassette recorder for me and I filled around nine sixty-minute cassettes.’

After listening to the tapes many times, Schumann settled down to write. ‘Sometimes songs take months to write. Sometimes they just tumble out. I reckon I wrote *I Was Only Nineteen* in fifteen minutes. It was like it’d already been written. As proud as I am of *19*, that morning I felt as if I was little more than a conduit.’

Schumann believes that the song hit a chord with many Australians, ‘I suspect it was a way of saying sorry: sorry we didn’t think how us marching down city streets protesting must have looked to you from the paddy-fields of Vietnam; sorry we didn’t stop to ask you how you were feeling when you came home; sorry we didn’t understand that this was a different war from the one our fathers fought; sorry we didn’t pay attention when you tried to tell us you were crook; sorry we let the government work you over. Sorry.’

**Author Background:**

Best known for his leadership of legendary Australian folk-rock band Redgum, John Schumann's Vietnam War anthem, 'I Was Only 19' changed the way our nation thinks about how we treat our war veterans. Described by rock historian Glenn A Baker as 'one of the finest songwriters this country has produced', John has received almost every award the Australian music industry has to offer. His songs have been paid the ultimate compliment by becoming the property of the people and country they were written about. His lyrics are read in schools and universities across Australia.

**Artist Background:**

Craig Smith is one of Australia's most prolific children's book illustrators. He has collaborated with many of Australia's best-loved authors, such as Paul Jennings and Doug MacLeod, and published books for A&U including *The Big Ball of String, The Boy Who Built the Boat, Heather Fell in the Water* and *Where Are You, Banana?*

**Suggestions for classroom discussion and application:**

* Before opening *I Was Only Nineteen* consider the title and cover design. Discuss the mood set by the cover. Is it serious or humorous? Talk about how mood can be influenced by visual cues such as font, framing, subject matter and perspective. How do some or all of these elements work on this cover? How do the words *The iconic song about the Vietnam War that helped change a nation* affect this mood?
* Read the story once and then break the class into smaller research groups to find out more about one or more of the following topics:
* The Vietnam War: reasons for the War, who were the combatants, length of the War, how it was viewed back in Australia during the 1960s.
* Type of warfare involved, Chinooks, Agent Orange, landmines.
* How soldiers returning from the War were treated by people who didn’t fight there.
* Some of the long-term physical and mental effects on returning Vietnam veterans.
* Post-war immigration of Vietnamese refugees to Australia.
* Turn to the first double-page spread inside the front cover. What is being depicted here and who do you think we are looking at? When is this happening – a long time ago or very recently? What visual clues in the picture make you think this? How does it set up the story to come? Now turn the page and discuss the impact of this image. Why do you think the illustrator/designer has left so much blank space on the double-page spread? What is the effect of seeing the chopper flying away with machine guns pointing out the doors? What role does contrast (or putting two very different things together) play in the first two double-page spreads of the book?
* The story regularly returns to contemporary times and looks at the long-term effects of being a Vietnam veteran. What are some of the visual and textual cues for this? (Note: study the double-page spread showing our narrator visiting a doctor. Perhaps draw attention to the image of the doctor. Who is she and where might she be from?)
* Look at the double-page spread accompanying the words *A four-week operation, when each step could mean your last one on two legs: it was a war within yourself.* Discuss what fighting a ‘war within yourself’ might mean? Discuss why the artist decided to show a quite panoramic image of war here when the narrator is talking about his inner conflict.
* Turn to the double-page spread showing the explosion when Frankie steps on a landmine. In what way has the illustrator reflected the sense of ‘a God almighty roar’? Consider colour, multiple outlines around Frankie’s body, density of paint, and lack of background detail, among other things.
* In their own words let students write the story of *I Was Only Nineteen* from the little boy’s point of view, changing the title to **He** Was Only Nineteen. How does the story change when you change the perspective?
* Compare the image of the contemporary ANZAC Day march seen on the back endpapers with earlier depictions of soldiers marching. How do they differ and what do you think the artist is saying about soldiers in general? What is the effect of including the narrator’s grandson in the image?
* End the unit by playing the following YouTube clip of Redgum’s *I Was Only 19* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Urtiyp-G6jY>).

In a whole class forum talk about whether the picture book matches the mood of the song they have just listened to. How does the book reflect the song as you hear it and how does it extend what is in the song? (If students are struggling with this concept point them in the direction of the relationship between the little boy and his grandfather which is depicted in the book and not in the song).

* Older students might want to do some extra research on the response to the song when it was first performed and why John Schumann says in his afterword, ‘Oh, and one last thing – don’t let anyone ever tell you that songs can’t change the world.’

**Selling Points:**

* *I Was Only 19* is one of the most famous songs ever written in Australia.
* There would be very few, if any, teachers or librarians who are not aware of the song and its relevance to studies of war.
* 2014 marks 100 years since the start of WWI, creating even more interest in the ANZAC legend and legacy.
* The book will be featured in mailings and newsletters to schools and is on the Allen & Unwin website.
* *I Was Only Nineteen* will be advertised in key children’s literature journals.