



Teachers' Notes WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

JOHN HEFFERNAN

OMNIBUS BOOKS

Category	Junior Fiction
Title	Where There's Smoke
Author	John Heffernan
Extent	216 pp
Age	10+
Australian RRP	\$17.99
Binding	Paperback
Printing	Mono
ISBN	978 1 86291 866 5
Format	198 x 128 mm

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THE STORY

It's midsummer, bushfire season, and the weather is hot. There is smoke over the hills. As the story opens Luke is having a fight with the school bully, Smithy. The fight is interrupted by Sarah, Luke's friend, who is disgusted by this need of boys to brawl in the school yard. Luke is a newcomer to the small country town and knows he has to defend himself or lose respect. He and his mother have settled here in Edenville to escape the violence of Luke's father. Tiny Cobb, a friend of Nina, Luke's mother, has helped them to do this and keeps a protective eye on them both. They have very little, but Nina works hard. Sarah, on the other hand, lives with her family in a lavish house with a swimming pool. They both love animals though, and together they help old Mrs Crawley with the menagerie of animals she keeps in the grounds of her old family mansion. All too soon, Luke's mother thinks she has seen her husband looking for them, and they both feel fearful. After more trouble at school, Luke goes to Tiny's place and tells him. Tiny offers to help and then takes him fishing, in his Humvee, and they have a hair-raising ride to a deep valley and the river. Luke finds that Sarah is angry with him because she thinks he has been fighting again and they part on bad terms. The next day is Saturday. Tiny is worried about the weather and the threat of fire, but the townspeople are not listening. Nina agrees and organises a group to collect older people and take them down the mountain, just in case. Luke and Tiny go around the town, warning people to leave. The fire hits with incredible force, and it's a wild scramble for survival. Luke and Tiny help fight the fire using the water tank Tiny is towing behind the Humvee. Tiny leaves to help men trying to save other buildings in the town. But the fire is too fierce, and eventually everyone must retreat to the only open area, a sports oval. Not everyone has been able to escape, and the traumatised survivors look after each other as best they can after the fire front has passed. Luke has burns to his hands, but is relieved when the Humvee arrives at the oval. Someone else is driving, because Tiny is badly injured. Luke fears the worst as a helicopter airlifts his friend to hospital. Nina makes contact on Tiny's phone, and is overjoyed to find Luke alive. Luke meets Sarah, who tells how Tiny saved their lives. They have lost everything, but this time Luke is able to help by urging her to come with him to do what they can for survivors. They go to Mrs Crawley's house and find her and all the animals safe and well, sheltering under the burnt-out shell of the house. Luke's house is gone, but while he waits there for Nina he has a call from the hospital. Tiny has survived. Although everything material is lost, Luke feels there is hope and a sense of community in Edenville. He and his mother have a life here.

FROM THE AUTHOR

John Heffernan lives in northern NSW, where he ran a sheep and cattle property with his wife. His early training as a teacher has been invaluable in both his writing and in establishing a relationship with young readers. He is now a full-time writer. His most recent novel *Marty's Shadow* was an honour book in the 2008 CBCA Book of the Year Older Readers' category and was shortlisted in the young adult category of the 2008 Queensland Premier's Literary Awards.

'The more I write, the more I realise that it is often the story that finds the author, rather than the other way around. This is certainly true of *Where There's Smoke*.

At the start of 2009 I had several story ideas fleshed out and ready to go. But then Black Saturday happened, 7 February, and those stories became irrelevant. The seed of a far more important story had been planted, and I knew it would not leave me alone until I *grew* it out. There was no choice.

Most of us tend to spend life caught up in our own little worlds, concerned with personal problems and issues. And that's fair enough; we are after all the leading character in our story. But sometimes the world hurls things at us – wars, tsunamis, earthquakes, bushfires – that are so much bigger than we are. Suddenly our personal problems become nothing.

Of course, such disasters can emotionally destroy the survivors and lead to a life of endless suffering. But they can also make people stronger – stories of hope rising from the ashes.

Where There's Smoke is one of those stories.

I wrote the first draft of this book without stopping; it almost poured out of me onto the page. That's because I felt such a strong affinity with the two main characters, Luke and Tiny. Sometimes it even felt as if they were inside me, controlling my fingers at the keyboard. Other times, I swear I could see them ahead, twiddling their thumbs while I fiddled with a descriptive passage, impatient for me to catch up and get on with the story. For the story is what it's all about. That's another thing I'm gradually realising as an author – the story is everything. We use many tools in this wordy craft: prose to lure and lift; action to thrill; settings that grab imagination; suspense that rivets; characters we identify with. But in truth all these tools are chiselling away to one end – telling a tale worth telling, and telling it well.

I do hope I've done that with this book.'

BEFORE READING THE TEXT

Read with students the author's note on page 207. John Heffernan points out that the fires in Victoria in 2009 were partly his inspiration for writing this book. Ask students to think about, as they are reading the story, how an author can be inspired by a real event yet make an entirely new story based on it.

Look at the author's dedication and the quotation he has chosen to express something that he feels about this story. Ask students to read the quotation and discuss what they think it means and come back to this after reading the book and see if they still have the same opinion.

The logo of CFA (Country Fire Authority) features on the back cover, with the note that a donation for every copy sold will be given to the authority by the publisher. In what other ways can the community support CFA?

READING THE TEXT

There are a number of different ways your class could read this novel:

- Together as a class
- In small groups (literature circles)
- Allowing students to read it at home, while some chapters are read aloud in class.

As the students read, ask them to keep a diary charting their progress.

(Make a larger copy of this outline for the students to keep in their folder or book)

Thursday

Chapter	Main characters	Main events
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		

Friday

Chapter	Main characters	Main events
8		
9		
10		
11		
12		
13		
14		
15		
16		

Saturday

Chapter	Main characters	Main events
17		
18		
19		
20		
21		
22		
23		
24		
25		
26		
27		
28		
29		
30		

Sunday

Chapter	Main characters	Main events
31		
32		
33		
34		

If working in literature circles, make sure there is a leader in each group who keeps them on task. Have a timetable in the room to show when each chapter or section should be completed.

Each week, allocate one lesson to discussing the novel. Spend some time each lesson to ensure the students are all keeping pace with the class, and completing their outline sheet. Keep a word list on a display board and encourage the class to add unfamiliar words as they appear in the text.

AFTER READING THE TEXT

1. CHARACTERISATION

Draw a profile of each of the main characters. In the classroom, make large cutout figures of each one and pin these to a display board. Ask students to add words that describe each person on the sheet. Discuss the best words to describe that person and write up a report about one of the characters.

Ask leading questions such as:

- Who do you like the most and why?
- Who do you sympathise with the most and why?
- How has the author developed your involvement with the characters?

For many readers, Tiny may be an inspiring character because of his attitude towards life and his independent spirit. He shows that it is not always necessary to 'fit in' to a community to be an integral part of it. Luke and his mother are also outsiders in this small community of Edenville but they become part of it by caring for others and making a contribution. Discuss the idea of 'hermits' and why characters such as the Bird Man and the grumpy old Mr Barnaby shun the community. What happens to them in the bushfire?

2. SETTING AND PLOT STRUCTURE

As students will see from their chapter-by-chapter analysis, the story has a very specific time frame. Discuss why the author might have structured the story like this. Is it to move the story along quickly, to emphasise how quickly a fire can

spread out of control and hit so suddenly and uncontrollably? Is it to make a parallel with 'Black Saturday' from the 2009 fires?

Ask students to look at their chapter analysis and summarise in their own words what happens on each 'day' or section of the story. What holds the longer third section, 'Saturday', together? Why is it longer than the other sections?

On page 141 John Heffernan describes the fire as 'a monster'. In his book *February Dragon*, Colin Thiele also sees it as an imaginary creature (i.e. a dragon). Is this a good description? Do you think the people of Edenville's description of the fire as 'the red steer' is a good one? Does it help to give something a name?

3. FIND OUT ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Heffernan has written many books, often showing readers what it is like to live in the country or on a farm. Many of his books have won awards, and he is recognised for his animal stories. John's books include *Marty's Shadow*, a CBC Honour Book (Older Readers), *A Horse Called Elvis*, *Spud*, and picture books *My Dog*, illustrated by Andrew McLean, Winner, CBCA Book of the Year: Younger Readers, 2002; Honour Book, CBCA Picture Book of the Year, 2002; *Two Summers*, illustrated by Freya Blackwood, Winner, CBCA Picture Book of the Year, 2004; and *The Island*, illustrated by Peter Sheehan.

Divide your class into groups and ask them to check out John's website at <http://www.spudplus.com/>. Each group could look at a different section and share the information from the website with the class to compile a class biography.

Look up John Heffernan on Google and find other information from the sites that come up. More can be added to the class biography. One site that will appear is the Western Australian Department of Education Library site at <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/education/cmisis/eval/fiction/authors/at8.htm#heffernan>. This site features links to additional information.

4. THEMES

Ask your class to suggest some of the themes in the book. Remind them that a theme is not the story or plot, but a subject within the story. Among others that could be explored, *Where There's Smoke* has themes of family (one-parent families and nuclear families), bullying, respect, being on the outside and natural disasters.

Put the class into small groups, each group choosing one theme. Ask them to look closely at the theme, and how it is presented in the novel. Write down examples of where the theme is discussed and explored. For instance, Bullying is a theme very much in Luke's thoughts in Chapter 1 (Smithy) and his father (Chapter 6). He understands that fear is the key: that he and his mother must overcome their fear of his father or forever be under his control. With Smithy, Luke knows that he must stand up for himself and earn respect if he is going to be able to live with himself in this new school.

Each group could brainstorm ideas on to butcher paper which can be pinned up and shared with the class.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- The cover shows a photograph taken from the Victorian bushfires of 2009. Ask students to find out about bushfires in Australia, first by asking their parents and/or grandparents or other older people what they remember about particular bushfires (e.g. bushfires of 1939, Ash Wednesday of 1983, Eyre Peninsula, South Australia, fires of 2005). Research on the Internet will refer to many resources on this topic, but making the search specific to the local area or state will narrow it down considerably.
- A bushfire is one kind of natural disaster. Discuss as a class other types of natural disaster. Divide the class into groups and allocate one type of natural disaster (tsunami, earthquake, volcanic eruption, flood, drought) to each group. Ask students to report their findings to the class. Students could research the causes of natural disasters such as tsunamis and volcanic eruptions.
- Since the terrible loss of life in the 2009 bushfires, Australia has adopted a new fire warning system. As part of an art project, ask students to research the three key points of this system and depict them as a poster. The three-step warning system can be found at:
<http://www.cfa.vic.gov.au/residents/summer/warningsystem.htm>
- Ask students to write and illustrate a newspaper article about the events at Edenville on the day of the fire.
- Ask students to research different kinds of bushfire e.g. What is a crown fire, and why is it so dangerous? We understand how temperature, dry conditions and hot winds can advance fires, but how does the lie of the land (topography)

affect the progress of a bushfire? How have Aboriginal people used fire in Australia?

- Look at Google Earth and identify heavily wooded land near an urban area, either in the city or the country, not necessarily the local area. Can you identify potential problems of living in such an area? Are there open areas such as the sports field that the people of Edenville escape to? Is there more than one way to escape a fire (i.e. is there more than one road leading in and out of the area?) If students imagined themselves as Tiny or Luke, warning residents to escape, what would they suggest as a way out of the area?
- Tiny uses his vehicle, a Humvee, to great effect in the bushfire. Find out everything you can about Humvees and why they would be useful in a bushfire situation. Draw a picture of Tiny's Humvee with trailer and water tank attached. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of owning a Humvee?

FURTHER READING

Read some other books about bushfires, to compare with *Where There's Smoke*. Marguerite Hann Syme's *Burnt Out* is a novel for older readers based on the author's experience of losing her house and all family possessions in the Ash Wednesday bushfires of 1983. It is a powerful account of the human cost of being in a bushfire and trying to account for all members of the family and then relying on others during the aftermath in trying to rebuild a home and a life.

Dugan, Michael	<i>Dragon's Breath</i> (picture book)
Gleeson, Libby	<i>Eleanor Elizabeth</i>
Hann Syme, Marguerite	<i>Burnt out</i>
Hann Syme, Marguerite	<i>Bushfire</i> (picture book)
Paice, Margaret	<i>Blue Ridge Summer</i>
Southall, Ivan	<i>Ash Road</i>
Thiele, Colin	<i>February Dragon</i>

BIBLIOGRAPHY

For a list of books about bushfires, see:

<http://www.anbg.gov.au/library/bushfire.html>