

PIG BOY

J.C. BURKE

TEACHING SUPPORT KIT

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1. INTRODUCTION

J.C. Burke won the Children’s Book Council of Australia Book of the Year: Older Readers for *The Story of Tom Brennan*, which is also on the NSW HSC English Curriculum. Now she’s back with an equally powerful, confronting story for young adults.

Always willing to tackle difficult questions, taboo topics and characters who seem unloveable, in *Pig Boy* J.C. Burke takes us into the mind of Damon, a boy who has been called ‘freak’ for years, and who has been pushed to the brink. Bullied, reviled by the town, and a witness to an event he can’t even speak about, Damon is about to take matters into his own hands.

From the nature of good and evil to the horror of the Bosnian war, from the effect of violent video games to the harm caused by bullying and malicious gossip, *Pig Boy* will challenge readers’ perceptions and assumptions. Who is the bully here? Who is the danger to the town of Strathven? *Pig Boy* will send a chill down your spine – and make you think.

2. SYNOPSIS

It’s Damon Styles’ eighteenth birthday, but it doesn’t feel like a celebration. His mother only just wakes up in time to wish him a happy birthday before he has to leave for school.

At school, though, there is a nasty surprise waiting for Damon. He is called to Principal Pascoe’s office and told that he is being expelled from the campus and can only sit his final exams in the community library. From Damon’s perspective, this makes no sense. The stories he writes for English have won prizes for Strathven High, but Pascoe won’t even acknowledge that, instead pointing out that Damon’s stories are full of gore and death. Damon has broken school property and threatened a teacher again – his most recent misdemeanours – and Pascoe wants him off the school grounds, away from the students and teachers. Full of anger, Damon leaves Strathven High. But it’s what happens to him on his way home that changes everything ...

The reader feels Damon’s shock as he writes, ‘I didn’t know my hands could shake like this ... I’m pumped’ (p. 17) – but author J.C. Burke isn’t giving the whole story at this point. Instead we read what Damon writes in his notebook: he needs to come up with a plan because of what has happened. It’s the only way he can think straight.

First, he needs to get his firearms licence. He needs to see if the Pigman will give him a job – because pig hunting with Miro will teach Damon what he needs to know. And get a lock for the cupboard so his mother won’t find what he’s had to hide in there.

As Damon puts his plan into action, the reader learns more about him, and the events in his childhood and teenage years that have shaped who he is today: an incident with a neighbour’s cat and the ‘evil’ Marshall brothers; the incident with a gun at Year 10 school camp that made Damon a ‘psycho’ in the eyes of his fellow students and the people of Strathven; his family history, his lack of friends. Damon’s father, a truck driver, left the family when he was very young. His mother’s new boyfriend, Archie, left when Damon was in Year 10 – and his mother blames Damon. Archie was a hunter, and Damon used to love watching him cleaning his guns and telling stories about the history of each one. Yet Damon dreads the weekends Archie takes him hunting. Damon is a great lover of animals and is terrified of shooting a gun.

With the eyes of the town upon him, Damon feels trapped. He develops a tentative friendship with Miro, a Bosnian Serb who hunts pigs and sells the meat to a butcher in the town. Miro has secrets of his own, secrets from the Bosnian War. Damon begins to learn Miro’s secrets, and he thinks about telling Miro his own.

But it might be too late. The people of Strathven think they know what Damon’s secret is, what he is planning – and they’re taking matters into their own hands.

3. STRUCTURE AND STYLE

Written in **first-person** from Damon's perspective, the reader only finds out what Damon is thinking about at that particular moment. Can we trust Damon's account of events? He seems to have a different view to others in the town – he can't understand why he is being expelled, for instance, when other boys such as Parker and Geraghty are never punished for their bullying.

This writing style gives us a deeper understanding of Damon as the book progresses. We learn, for example, that he abhors violence and cannot shoot a gun – a view that doesn't seem to tally with his love of violent computer games and what he is hiding in his wardrobe. It is these juxtapositions, these facts that don't match up, that keep the reader reading, and wanting to learn the truth.

The first-person, **present-tense** style also contributes to the tension and claustrophobia of the novel. The reader is experiencing Damon's emotions as he does – a narrative style known as **stream of consciousness**. We feel his shock and anger at being expelled, we see his complete break-down on p. 17 when J.C. Burke switches from having Damon narrate the story to showing us what he writes in his notebook in that moment – swearing and all. The text is also punctuated with updates on Damon's lists – his 'to-do' list that relates to his plan, and the lists of people that he makes when he is angry.

J.C. Burke has said that she deliberately wrote the book from Damon's perspective: 'I wanted it to be confronting. I wanted Damon to be unappealing, for people to not know whether to hate him. He's unlikeable and easy to judge.' One of the hardest tasks in writing the book, J.C. says, was to make sure readers would stick with Damon and his story, despite him being easy to dislike.

J.C.'s publisher, Zoe Walton, agrees: 'You'll find any number of blogs and books that tell writers that making their characters likeable is one of the most important factors in getting published – and that's generally good advice. But occasionally a writer can play with that convention, turn it on its head, and that's just what J.C. Burke does in *Pig Boy*.'

Pig Boy also plays with some of the **conventions of the mystery novel**, with the author withholding important information, giving 'red herrings', revealing motivations through material that seems incidental, and having a murder at the heart of the novel, which provides the impetus for characters' later actions. The story is written in such a way that it leads readers to certain conclusions, then makes them confront their assumptions and judgements that led them to those conclusions.

Discussion questions:

- Why did J.C. Burke choose to write *Pig Boy* in the present tense? Would it have been as effective if it had been written in past tense?
- Did you like Damon? Why/why not? Did you like him more or less as the story progressed? Compare how you felt about him at the beginning of the novel and at the end. How important is a character's likeability when you are reading a novel?
- Can Damon be considered an unreliable narrator? Can you believe everything he says? How have his experiences shaped his own perceptions?
- The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines a red herring as 'something to divert attention; a false clue'. How does J.C. Burke divert your attention from the truth? What false clues are presented in *Pig Boy*? What did you think Damon's plan was? What clues made you think that? When did you realise what was really happening?

4. THE WRITING PROCESS

There is a piece of advice for writers that says '**Write what you know**'. J.C. Burke hadn't been pig hunting herself, nor had she gutted a pig, but because it was integral to the story, she organised to go pig hunting in north-western New South Wales (see photos).

J.C. says: 'I kept the blood-covered shirt from my trip in a bag, and when I was writing I would get it out – the smell would take me right back into that experience. I knew I had to go out pig shooting, and it made sense in the story for Damon's experiences to mirror mine, because we were both having that experience for the first time.'

Discussion questions:

- How has the author's experience influenced the text? Consider the sights, sounds, smells and other senses evoked in the pig killing scenes. Has the author made the scenes feel realistic?
- Do you think writers should only write about 'what they know'?



5. PRE-READING AND POST-READING ACTIVITIES

PRE-READING: INVESTIGATING THE COVER

Before reading *Pig Boy*, students might like to consider the following questions:

- What does the cover say about the book? Do you like it? Are you *meant* to like it? Take note of the way the image on the front cover is only seen inside the letters of the title – the murky grey and the hidden depths of the image hint at the secrets and layers to be found inside.
- Read the back cover blurb. What do you think the book will be about? Speculate on what you think 'happens afterward', and how Damon is planning to 'take matters into his own hands'.

POST-READING: GETTING THE STORY STRAIGHT

Immediately after reading *Pig Boy*, divide into small groups and develop answers to these questions:

- What did the people in the town think Damon was planning? Were they correct?
- What did *you* think Damon was going to do as you were reading? Did your opinion change? Why did you change your mind?
- What did the 'what happened afterward' in the cover blurb refer to?
- Consider the book's cover again. What extra symbolism does the front cover image take on now that you have read the book?

6. THEMES

These are some of the key themes explored in *Pig Boy*. Some are examined in more detail below.

- Family relationships and conflicts, especially mother/son
- Bullying
- Belonging and community
- Assumptions and judgements we make about others
- Friendship
- War
- Pig hunting and cruelty to animals
- Intolerance and prejudice
- The harmful effects of gossip and misinformation
- Justice and revenge
- Violent video games and their effects
- The 'real world' vs the online world
- How experience and environment shape who we are
- Nature vs nurture

7. MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS

PIGS

- Damon is 'the fat kid that people made pig noises at and called "Damoink"' (p. 5).
- Parker and Geraghty call Damon's mother 'the sow' (p. 49).
- Pig hunting and butchering is described in detail in the book.
- **Discussion questions:** What do pigs mean to Damon? What could the book's title symbolise?

THE CHINA CATS

- 'I slam the front door and her china cats rattle in the cabinet. Just this year I've unhinged two doors. But it's never been enough to shatter one of those ugly cats.' (p. 1)
- 'Is this how they will creep down the hallway when they come for me, I wonder. So softly, so as not to even rattle the china cats in the cabinet?' (p. 45)
- 'And when we make the third anniversary he buy me them lovely china cats' (p. 83)
- **Discussion question:** What do the china cats mean to Damon? Does that change when he learns that the china cats were a gift to his mother from Archie?

THE SATIN PILLOWCASE

- 'I shut my eyes and try to remember how Mum's pillow-case smelt ... I'd bury my face into the silk, searching, running my nostrils along the fabric until I found the spot ... that smelt exactly like her. I would breathe it in as if it was her skin, as if she was actually there with me. Once I must've cared what Mum thought of me. But I can't remember when.' (pp. 154-155)
- **Discussion question:** What does the satin pillowcase mean to Damon? Consider the ways in which he has been bullied in the past, and how the pillow might represent safety and security. Can his mother provide that security?

MIRO'S DISLOCATED FINGERS

- 'I see the tops of his fingers have dislocated themselves again. His face doesn't move – not a frown, not a blink – as he snaps them back into position as though they were plastic clips on a container.' (p. 181)
- **Discussion question:** What do Miro's dislocated fingers represent? Consider how much he's been through. Are his fingers an everyday, ordinary reminder of the war – and/or are they a reminder that war is everyday and ordinary?

8. DISCUSSING THEMES IN DETAIL

BULLYING

- Which characters in *Pig Boy* are bullies?
- Is Damon a bully?
- Can a bully be bullied?
- Compare Parker and Geraghty with the Marshall brothers. Is the verbal bullying of Parker and Geraghty as bad as the intimidation tactics and cruelty (and worse) of the Marshall brothers?
- What have been the signs of the Marshall brothers' escalating violence, from the cat to what happens in the story? Was this inevitable? Are they truly evil?
- Is a person naturally good or evil? What makes them evil? What makes them good?

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

'I can't help wondering if we've always been this clumsy with each other.' (p. 36)

'Mum's suspicious, she snoops; rarely has she given me the benefit of the doubt and I give it all right back and that's how we live together. Perhaps we got clumsier over time. But those were the terms of us. At least, that's how I'd always read them.' (p. 309)

- Did you notice that Damon's mother is never given a name? J.C. Burke says, 'I chose to do that deliberately.' Why do you think the author did this? What does it tell us about Damon?
- How does Damon's mother's colloquial language and lack of formal education affect your reading of her? J.C. Burke says: 'I left hints that she is not as unintelligent as she might sound. For instance, she does cryptic crosswords – not everyone can do those.'
- Who is the abusive person in this mother-son relationship? Do both parties share the blame for the problems in their relationship?
- Was what Damon's mother did at the end right or wrong? Compare her actions to Miro's.
- Many of Damon's actions are to protect his mother. Does she need protecting? From whom?
- Is Damon's mother in any way responsible for the way the town perceives Damon? Is she in any way responsible for the situation he is in now? Consider this quote:

'We could go to Adelaide and visit Aunt Yvonne.' I imagine how easy it'd be to breathe interstate. 'We've never been and you haven't seen your sister in a couple of years.'

'Me sister only feels the need to see us when there's a crisis,' Mum replies. In a split second of insanity, I think of telling her that this is a crisis but she keeps talking. 'And I

don't count sitting ya final exams in the public library a national disaster, thanks all the same. Even though she probably would. She's so Mrs La-di-da, my life is perfect and I don't want no one muckin' it up.' (p. 60)

How might the story have been different if the family had left for Adelaide at this point?

- Does his mother blame Damon for Archie leaving?
- Does Damon respect his mother, and care for her? Compare these two actions and find other evidence in the book showing how Damon feels about his mother:

(1) I was about eight years old when I started counting Mum's breath. It was after my father left. 'Ya goin' to kill me,' she'd say. 'Ya goin' to be the death of me. One day, son, ya goin' wake up and find me dead.'

So as long as there was something to count, I figured she was still alive. (p. 23)

(2) It's amazing she hasn't started banging on my door, 'cause that's usually what she does when I storm off and she doesn't get her way. She follows me to my room and I let her knuckles pound and rap against the wood while I sit here not making a sound.

She doesn't burst in any more. Not since I pushed her and she went flying. (p. 33)

- **Activity:** Draw a timeline of the relationship and conflict between Damon and his mother as the novel progresses. What are the high points? What are the low points? When did their relationship start to change, become 'clumsy'?

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

- Damon is wrongly accused of an intent to commit a crime.
- Research other people in history who have been wrongly accused of a crime, for example Lindy Chamberlain. Do you think the evidence was sufficient to convict them? How was their innocence eventually proven? Were they presumed guilty from the start?
- Make a list of the evidence in the case that the police are building against Damon.
- Research the laws of evidence. How much evidence is generally required before charges can be laid? What can and can't be admitted in court?
- Investigate the influence the media have on court cases. Can media opinions have an effect on public perceptions? On jury perceptions? On the judge?
- Discuss the term 'vilification by media'. How might the media view Damon?
- Set up a mock trial in the classroom. Act as lawyers for and against Damon, and use other characters as witnesses, including Mr Pascoe, Parker, Geraghty, Moe, Bridie, Miro and Damon's mother. Which characters would be for and against Damon? Do any of these characters have admissible evidence, or is their evidence hearsay or circumstantial?
- Have Parker and Geraghty committed a crime? If so, what is it?

HOW OUR ENVIRONMENT AND EXPERIENCES SHAPE WHO WE BECOME

- J.C. Burke says: 'It was very intentional that I set the book in a small town. I needed to have the ability to manipulate the environment to benefit the story.'
- How would the story be different if the book was set in a city? Consider whether Damon can escape; consider the gossip, the insular community in the small town of Strathven. Are small towns parochial and insular? Do they have a dark side? Or can cities and suburbs have the same features? Make a list of the positive and negative aspects of living in a small town versus a larger one.

- Miro’s environment looks chaotic and dysfunctional when Damon first sees it, but Damon later realises how ordered Miro is – Miro only owns what he needs to survive. What does Miro’s lifestyle tell us about our levels of consumption in today’s society? What does it symbolise when Miro buys duplicate plates, glass, etc, for when Damon visits?
- Damon seems to have been misunderstood since an early age. On p. 75 he recounts how he was accused of tipping pencil sharpenings into the classroom fish tank – which doesn’t tally with his affinity for animals, as we see at other times. Why do others misunderstand Damon?
- Are you pushed toward becoming the person other people think you are?
- How might the situation be different if Pascoe had reported the Year 10 camp incident to the police? Might the truth have come out, or would Damon still have been called ‘psycho’?
- How have the male figures in Damon’s life affected him – his father and Archie? Would he have been a different person if his father had stuck around? If Archie had?
- Damon often has a negative attitude towards women. Find examples of this in the book. Where does this attitude come from? Is it how he really feels, or is he putting on an act – ‘acting tough’ because he feels insecure around girls due to his inexperience? Find an example in the novel that supports this theory.
- Discuss the difference between ‘nature’ (our genetic material) and ‘nurture’ (our experiences and environment). What is the interplay between them? Can a person be genetically predisposed to being ‘evil’ or sociopathic? How much of a role does experience play in determining our character?

9. RESEARCHING THE ISSUES

Pig Boy takes as its subjects some ‘hot button’ issues in today’s society – issues that people feel strongly about, and that cause much argument, concern and controversy, along with media and political attention. Some of these issues are explored below and are worthy of further study and classroom debate.

PIG HUNTING IN AUSTRALIA

- Research the pros and cons of hunting boar in Australia.
- What methods are used? Are some more or less cruel to the animals? Is more regulation required in this area?
- What are the environmental impacts of wild boar on native flora and fauna populations? Is culling feral pigs necessary to protect our native animal populations? Or is all hunting cruel?

SCHOOL SHOOTINGS AND THE VALIDITY OF PROFILING

- In *Pig Boy*, the people of Strathven suspect that Damon is capable of committing a massacre-style shooting, and the police find evidence that they believe corroborates this claim.
- Investigate real-life school shootings that have taken place. One of the best known examples is Columbine High School in Colorado, USA, where on 20 April 1999 students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold murdered thirteen people before committing suicide. Compare their profiles to Damon’s. Has J.C. Burke drawn from real-life people in creating the fictional Damon?
- Watch Michael Moore’s film *Bowling for Columbine*.

- Are there common factors in the profiles of the shooters in this type of crime? What are their characteristics? Is it too simplistic to ‘profile’ teenagers by looking for these characteristics?
- *Pig Boy* certainly questions the validity of profiling, as we get to know Damon better:
 - For instance, Damon is antisocial, a loner, volatile and prone to anger and violent actions, obsessed with death and with violent computer games – characteristics that might support a claim that he is a threat to others. The police find evidence in his bedroom of what they believe to be his intentions: a weapon, notebooks filled with lists of people he hates and banned games featuring school massacres.
 - On the other hand, there are sides to Damon’s personality that negate the idea of him being capable of extreme violence, such as his affinity for animals and his inability to shoot when out hunting with Archie. As J.C. Burke notes, it is the lists Damon writes in his notebooks ‘that stop him being that person’ who could kill someone.
- Do schools, politicians and law enforcers need to take more action to prevent future shootings? Or does the media create ‘moral panic’ when in reality school shootings are rare?

VIOLENT COMPUTER GAMES – WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS?

- Research the debate about whether violent computer games such as *Mortal Kombat* should be banned or restricted. A good summary of the pros and cons of this issue can be found at: http://www.idebate.org/debatabase/topic_details.php?topicID=493
- Is there evidence that violent games encourage violence in young people? Has scientific research been conducted in this area?
- How is this debate portrayed in the media? For example, read these articles about computer games manufacturers being sued for their influence in the Columbine school massacre: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/1295920.stm> and [http://wiki.media-culture.org.au/index.php/Computer Games - Columbine and Violent Computer Games](http://wiki.media-culture.org.au/index.php/Computer_Games_-_Columbine_and_Violent_Computer_Games)
- What are the current restrictions on games in Australia?
- Is this a censorship issue? Should we be free to play whatever games we like, as long as appropriate age warnings are given?

WAR

- Research the Bosnian War. Who was fighting who? What were their reasons? How did the war begin and end?
- What role did the International Criminal Tribunal play after the war in prosecuting war crimes?
- A broader discussion of war can look at the moral issues involved.
 - If you are forced to do something, as Miro and his friends are, are you culpable? If you would be shot if you don’t pull the trigger, are you a murderer if you do?
 - Would Miro have cooperated with the Tribunal if his friend hadn’t been shot? Was it a moral choice and a desire for justice to be done that caused Miro to speak against his former commander at the Tribunal, or was it revenge for the death of his friend?
 - How can friends one day become enemies the next? Could this happen in Australia?
 - How can we prevent such atrocities happening again?

10. KEY LITERARY COMPARISONS

Here are some ideas for other novels that complement a study of *Pig Boy* because of their themes or writing style. Your teacher librarian might have more suggestions.

- Consider this quote from John Steinbeck's 1937 novel *Of Mice and Men*: 'A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you.'
 - **Discussion question:** How does this quote relate to *Pig Boy*? Would Damon's story be different if he'd had more childhood friends? Does Damon's friendship with Miro save him from going 'nuts'? Consider what Damon says on p. 321 as part of your answer.
- J.C. Burke says that Tom in her book *The Story of Tom Brennan* is 'very mainstream, he's easy to like. It was very different writing in the voice of someone unlikeable, like Damon.' But there are similarities between the two stories. For instance, J.C. says, 'In *The Story of Tom Brennan* I was very conscious of the withholding of information, and how that information was revealed as the story was told.' *Pig Boy* is also about the withholding of information, to be revealed gradually throughout the story.
 - **Activity:** Make a timeline showing when key pieces of information are given to the reader, and when the truth is revealed.
- Another way to compare *Pig Boy* to *The Story of Tom Brennan* is to look at the ways other people help the main character – compare the way Tom's girlfriend helps him to escape his situation after tragic events with the way Miro helps Damon. How much do you need to help yourself, and how important is the support of other people around you?
- Both Tom and Damon are also helped in their mood by eating better and being more active – Tom through running and Damon through working for the pig man.
 - **Discussion question:** How important is diet and exercise in affecting our moods?
- The mother in *The Story of Tom Brennan* is emotionally detached and absent. Damon's mother in *Pig Boy*, although more physically present, is also detached.
 - **Discussion question:** Compare the roles of these mothers. What is it telling us about the story?
- *The Story of Tom Brennan* is studied as part of the NSW HSC English curriculum under the topic 'Into the World'.
 - **Discussion question:** How does Damon venture 'into the world' in *Pig Boy*? Was he already living in the real world at the start of the book, or is he shocked to discover what the real world is like? Do the computer games he plays help to prepare him for the real world, or do they shelter him from reality?
- *We Need to Talk about Kevin* by Lionel Shriver is, in many ways, an opposite story to the one in *Pig Boy* – it is about a boy who seems to have been born with cruel tendencies, and who acts on his anger in a way that Damon doesn't. On the other hand, the two stories have similarities in that they both focus on a mother–son relationship, and the nature vs nurture debate.
 - **Discussion question:** In *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, Kevin's mother is sued for being a negligent parent. To what extent are parents responsible for the actions of their teenage children? How does this question relate to Damon's mother's actions? Can she control Damon? When she takes such a shocking action towards the end of the book, is she protecting Damon, or is she afraid of him – or both? Was Damon ever capable of committing the crime the town thought he could?

- ***The Innocents*** by Nette Hilton is another young adult novel set in small-town Australia and, like *Pig Boy*, it is about the dangers of misinformation and a possible miscarriage of justice.
 - **Discussion question:** Have things changed since the 1950s, when *The Innocents* is set, to today, when *Pig Boy* is set? How much intolerance and prejudice still exists in our society?
- J.C. Burke draws a comparison to M.J. Hyland’s novel ***How the Light Gets In*** in discussing how she made Damon a quite unlikeable character. J.C. says of Hyland’s character: ‘I could never work out how I felt about the main character – whether I trusted her or not as she was such an unreliable narrator.’
 - **Discussion question:** How do you feel about Damon in *Pig Boy*? Do you like him or hate him? Do you admire or pity him? How do you think J.C. Burke wants readers to feel about Damon?
- ***The Outsider*** by Albert Camus is another novel that has, as J.C. Burke says, an ‘unlikeable odd character’ for a main character. The character, Meursault, expresses no emotion, even after the death of his mother. Meursault narrates his own story, including how he shoots a man and is incarcerated for the crime.
 - **Discussion question:** What elements can be compared in *The Outsider* and *Pig Boy*? How does each treat the narration of emotion? How does each deal with the question of justice, revenge and authority?
- ***The Catcher in the Rye*** by J.D. Salinger is another famous novel about a boy who feels like an outsider – and who, like Damon, is expelled from school for his behaviour.
 - **Discussion question:** How do Holden Caulfield and Damon Styles deal with their feelings of alienation and disconnection from their communities? What might Holden have done if he had been a teenager in today’s society instead of the 1940s?
 - **Discussion question:** Both books use colloquial language and swearing to make the character’s voice seem more authentic. Is this effective?

11. ACTIVITIES

WRITING TASKS

- Write a page from the book in **past tense** and compare the reading experience.
- Write a **crime scene witness report**, detailing what Damon saw and heard in the bush behind the school the day he was expelled.
- Read Damon’s imagined **letter** to his mother on pp. 318–320. Choose from these options:
 - Write your own interpretation of what Damon would say in his letter to his mother.
 - Write a letter from Damon’s mother to him, explaining why she did what she did.
 - Write a letter from Damon to Principal Pascoe.
- Write an **account** of a scene in the book as if you are one of the other people in Strathven – for instance, Mo, Parker, Bridie, or Mr Pascoe. How does that person see Damon?
- Write a **newspaper article** based on events in the book. Will the article be impartial, or show some bias towards one or another of the parties? Examples include:
 - Imagine you are a reporter with the Strathven crowd outside Damon’s house when he is arrested. What would you write based on what you hear and know at this stage?
 - Write the article that will appear when the Marshall brothers’ crime is made public.

- What will happen next for Damon? Write an **epilogue** for the book, set six months later. Where is Damon now? What happened in the court case? Is Damon speaking to his mother?
- Write a **comparative essay** about young adult novels you have read about the experience of growing up in small or rural Australian towns. (Examples include: *Pig Boy*; *The Story of Tom Brennan* by J.C. Burke; *The Innocents* by Nette Hilton; *Dust* by Christine Bongers; *Town* by James Roy; *Getting Air* by Debra Oswald; *The Rage of Sheep* by Michelle Cooper.) Why do authors choose small towns to write about? What aspects of Australian culture do these novels evoke? Do they paint a true picture of Australian life?
- Imagine you are Damon’s lawyer, defending him against the crimes he has been charged with. Write your final **address** to the jury.

ROLEPLAYS AND DRAMA ACTIVITIES

- Have one person act as a psychologist or counsellor and another act as Damon. What questions might the counsellor ask? How would Damon respond? Does the rest of the class agree with that person’s interpretation of Damon’s feelings and behaviours?
- Choose a scene from the book to act out or perform a dramatic reading. Some key scenes might include:
 - Damon being interviewed by police (pp. 271–280).
 - Damon being expelled from school (pp. 10–15).
 - Damon talking to his lawyer (pp. 292–295).
 - Damon confessing his secret to Miro (pp. 208–212).
 - Miro confessing his secret to Damon – an exercise in studying Damon’s body language to see how he reacts as his words are few in this scene (pp. 252–254).

DEBATE TOPICS

- That violent computer games should be banned.
- That killing wild boar should be illegal in Australia.
- That in the words of John Steinbeck, ‘A guy goes nuts if he ain’t got nobody. Don’t make no difference who the guy is, long’s he’s with you.’
- That violence/war is human nature.
- That our identity is how we see ourselves (versus how others see us).
- That writers should only write what they know.