

Teachers' notes

Reading like an Australian Writer

Edited by Belinda Castles

Ellen van Neerven on *Swallow the Air* by Tara June Winch · Julienne van Loon on *That Deadman Dance* by Kim Scott · Tegan Bennett Daylight on *Cosmo Cosmolino* by Helen Garner · Ryan O'Neill on *Things We Didn't See Coming* by Steven Amsterdam · Rose Michael & Jane Rawson on **dystopias** · Anna Spargo-Ryan on **animal characters** · Felicity Castagna on **place in fiction** · Peter Polites on **reading to find yourself** · Ashley Hay on *The Natural Way of Things* by **Charlotte Wood** · Nigel Featherstone on **Christos Tsiolkas** · Cate Kennedy on *Breath* by **Tim Winton** · Roanna Gonsalves on *The Life to Come* by **Michelle de Kretser** · Angela Meyer on **MJ Hyland** · Fiona McFarlane on **'Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice'** · Hoa Pham on *Anguli Ma* by **Chi Vu** · Maria Takolander on *An Exploded View* by **Carrie Tiffany** · Debra Adelaide on *Snake* by **Kate Jennings** · Emily Maguire on **'The Fun of the Fair'** by **Elizabeth Harrower** · Belinda Castles on *Oscar and Lucinda* by **Peter Carey** · Irini Savvides on *Sixty Lights* by **Gail Jones** · Stephanie Bishop on **the short fiction of Gerald Murnane** · A.S. Patrić on *Ransom* by **David Malouf** · Beth Yahp on *Portable Curiosities* by **Julie Koh** · Nicholas Jose on *Elizabeth Costello* by **JM Coetzee** · Mykaela Saunders on *Carpentaria* by **Alexis Wright**

Introduction

This book was made on the premise that all writers begin as readers, and that careful, reflective reading shapes our creative selves. Australian stories give young and aspiring writers encouragement and represent experience in distinctive ways, in diverse Australian idioms. In these essays, contemporary writers of fiction, who are also teachers and mentors in creative writing, have chosen texts and authors that give them ways to think about and develop their own stories.

Across senior English curricula, students are asked to read and respond to high quality and diverse literary texts, reflecting on the ways in which their authors, through their use of language and literary devices, present experience to the reader. In the texts that students are asked to read, and choose for themselves, they encounter a range of cultures and ways of being that extend their knowledge of the world, and of their own lives.

The essays in *Reading like an Australian Writer* provide models for engaging with such texts. They are focused on language, technique, context, culture, nation, history and genre from the point of view of readers who wish to respond creatively to their reading and the world. They demonstrate analyses of texts from a creative perspective, and in ways that consider what it is to be an Australian reader and writer.

Activities for students

- Read any of the essays here and write about what is important to the writer of the essay in the stories they read. Do they focus on craft aspects (rhythm of sentences, creating tension, suspending disbelief etc)? Are they more interested in the social or political elements of

writing? Or do they discuss stories from another angle? Do they write about these stories in ways that tell you something about their own lives, or are they strictly analytical? What kinds of approaches to analysing writing do you find most helpful when you are thinking about making your own creative work? Do you know the story the writer is talking about? Is there anything surprising in the way they approach this text? (This could be preparation work for an extended written task, or could provide the basis of a presentation.)

- Think about the focus of one of these essays. For example Ellen van Neerven talks about 'kinship' both within *Swallow the Air* and in finding an Aboriginal voice as a young student. Fiona McFarlane talks about the way time is handled in her favourite Nam Le story. Cate Kennedy pays close attention to the techniques that quickly get the reader involved in the opening of *Breath*. Reflect on the ways these writers explore these topics in their essays, and apply a similar focus to a story you have read and appreciated.
- Choose an essay you find readable. Perhaps the style is poetic, or accessible, or intriguing. Write a paragraph in the style of this essay. Think about the elements of voice that make up this style. For example, look at the opening of Ryan O'Neill's essay: 'Short stories, but linked'. He uses a direct, clear tone, and relates an anecdote to take the reader into the essay and its subject. You could try this. Or look at Beth Yahp's essay on the stories of Julie Koh, which opens with a specific moment in time, and the images that make up her own location within it. She breaks the essay up into 'ten thoughts' that allow her to approach her subject from different angles. Consider what these different styles or approaches emphasise in their reading and analyses and how they create their effects. Think about your own 'critical voice'. How do you want to sound? Do we need a different kind of language to write analytically as opposed to creatively? If so, what are the differences? (It might be interesting to see if you can find the fiction of one of these essay-writers to see if there are elements of their writing present in their analytical and creative writing.)
- Choose an essay on a text or author you are familiar with. (Or you could read one of the stories discussed that sounds interesting to you.) Respond to the essay, as though you were writing to the author of it. You might talk about the points they raised that puzzled you, or deepened your understanding of writing, or that you did not agree with. Provide evidence from the story for your responses. Remember that conversations can agree in places, disagree in others, interpret points in new ways, and spark original ideas. Try to account for these various elements of a conversation in your 'letter'.
- Think about a story you have admired. Think, like these essay-writers, about what it was you appreciated. Write some notes that would help you to explain in a clear and detailed way to a friend or classmate the appeal of this text. Take any one of the elements you discuss to use as a prompt for a scene, story or poem. For example, if you have enjoyed a story in which the narrator had a distinctive voice, you might think about the features of that and of what sort of character it relates to, and whether you could try writing your own version. If it is the details you enjoy in a story, begin a piece of writing or character description by saying what is in someone's room or car. If a story you like uses related metaphors (like Tim Winton's *Breath* uses metaphors around drowning, water and breathing), could you write a piece in which the figurative language is themed (for example around machines, trees, food, medicine, art, sport etc.)?