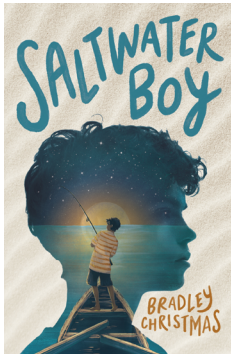




Walker Books Teacher Notes



Saltwater Boy

Bradley Christmas

9781760656393

March 2023

*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

Walker Books Australia
Locked Bag 22
Newtown, N.S.W., 2042

Ph +61 2 9517 9577
Fax +61 2 9517 9997

For enquiries please contact:
educationwba@walkerbooks.com.au

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Outline:

Heartfelt and poignant, this coming-of-age story explores father-son relationships against a backdrop of small town rivalries and buried truths, with themes of sustainability, preserving the past and environmental care.

When Dad goes to jail, Matthew and his mum move to the coast. Mum – an artist – thinks she can renovate her late father's old place to sell it and get them back on their feet. Matthew strikes up a friendship with Old Bill, an Indigenous man who becomes a father figure to him, and teaches him how to find and eat pippis, and to catch fish and crabs (and to make a few dollars from it). But when Dad gets out on parole and moves back in with the family, his anger fractures the newfound peace and everything is once again at stake, and in peril.

"Bradley Christmas pens a poignant and engaging story, gripping from the word go, with relatable themes of loss, family blues, crisis of identity, and finding one's place in the world. The prose is searing and raw while still emotive with truth in every word, and every piece of subtext, as well. The characters are well-drawn, verging on real people ... All in all, it's a fine debut, and clearly evident of a bright future for Bradley Christmas. I can't wait for the next one. Perfect for teen readers. Highly recommended." - Reading Time

Content Considerations:

This book explores, among other things, domestic violence, grief, bullying, racism, and toxic masculinity. While these issues are handled with care in the text, teachers are encouraged to be cognizant of the distress this exploration may uncover, monitor reactions and respond appropriately. In particular, consider providing support for students who may have had past experiences of trauma.

How to Use These Notes:

These notes are for: upper primary, lower secondary

Curriculum Areas:

- English
- Humanities and Social Sciences
- Health and Physical Education
- The Arts

Cross-Curriculum Priorities:

- Sustainability
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures

Themes:

- Family relationships
- Connection to Country
- Sustainability and environmental care
- Preserving the past
- Conflict
- Resilience



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Plot Summary

Matthew's dad Gary is in prison for theft and there's no money to pay the rent. So when Matthew and his mum Skye get evicted from their house in Sydney, Skye decides to take them to a remote coastal town called Crawley Point.

Here, they will work on an old house that belonged to Matthew's much-missed grandfather and grandmother. Matthew is sad and angry to be leaving his home and his best – and only – friend, Asha. At Crawley Point, Matthew meets Old Bill, an Indigenous man with a deep knowledge of the sea and a love for Country. Matthew is drawn to Old Bill and his gentle and patient nature, which is the opposite to his father's volatile temperament. Old Bill teaches Matthew how to fish and warns him of the dangers out beyond the reef.

Matthew settles into the rhythm of Crawley Point, helping his mum with the house and spending as many hours as he can with Old Bill. Matthew learns that there is a dark secret in Old Bill's past and that he lives out in the bush by himself because none of the townspeople want him around. Old Bill won't talk about it and Matthew is frustrated that he doesn't know the truth.

But then Gary is released from prison and joins Matthew and his mum at Crawley Point. Matthew's easy life is turned upside down by Gary's drinking, his stealing – and his ever-present anger. When Gary insists that he and Matthew 'borrow' Bill's boat and go beyond the reef to fish for marlin, Matthew tries to dissuade his father, telling him of Old Bill's warning. But Gary won't listen and the boating trip almost ends in tragedy. It is Matthew's courage and resilience – and Old Bill's knowledge – that saves them both.

The accident changes things for Gary, who suddenly finds himself reliant on other people.

When Bill invites Gary and Matthew to accompany him to a secret and sacred place, Gary agrees. It is in this remote place that old wounds are healed, that the animosity Gary has for Bill dissipates, and where Matthew learns the tragic secret that Bill has been keeping from him. And in this special place, Matthew learns that Bill has a plan for Matthew to become the keeper of Bill's ancestors' knowledge and that Matthew will be responsible for looking after the place that has become so important to him.

This is a moving and redemptive story of family, home, friendship and finding one's place in the world. Through the eyes of Old Bill, the reader learns the importance of Country and how we must respect and care for it for generations to come.

Setting and Environment

Curriculum Links: English, Humanities and Social Sciences, Health and Physical Education

Cross-curriculum priorities: Sustainability

Quote: 'Perfect ribbons of pure white sand stretched as far as I could see in both directions. The water was so crystal clear and blue that it looked like it belonged in a painting.' (p 53)

- Most of *Saltwater Boy* is set in a remote coastal town called Crawley Point. The author gives many vivid descriptions of the place, from the bush to the township, to the beach. Find some of the descriptions of Crawley Point and discuss the significance of the coastal town as a backdrop for the story. Explore how the environment and natural surroundings impact the characters and their experiences.
- How do the weather and Matthew's



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surroundings reflect what is happening in his life and in the story? Consider the storm on p 164 and how it is the culmination of Matthew's run-in with the surfer boys and with his dad.

- On p 165, Matthew surveys the beach and the damage that has been wrought after the storm. He says, 'It was another reminder that nothing stayed the same.' How does this echo the damage his father has brought into their lives? Consider also p 226: 'Dad's moods were a bit like the weather. They could change the atmosphere without him having to say a word.'
- From the outset, the reader learns that Matthew is in tune with his surroundings and has a love for and connection with nature. In particular, Matthew loves birds. How do birds work as a motif in the story? What do they symbolise for Matthew? Consider the scene on p 44 when Matthew feeds the two rosellas and notices one has a claw missing from its left foot. Later, Gary's dog Tommy kills the rosella. Discuss what you think the author is showing here about the relationship between Gary and Matthew and their individual connections to the world around them.
- Discuss the symbolism of the sea eagle that Matthew sees on p 370 when he visits Bill in hospital and then again on the last page of the story (p 388). Why do you think the author chose a sea eagle to represent Old Bill?

Character

Curriculum Links: Humanities and Social Sciences, Health and Physical Education

Cross-curriculum priorities: Sustainability; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander History and Cultures

Matthew

- Re-read the first seventy pages of *Saltwater Boy* and write a summary of what we learn about Matthew in these seventy pages. For example, he walks with a limp, he is the target of bullies, his father is in prison, he has one friend, he loves birds, and so on. How does Matthew change when he settles into Crawley Point? Analyse his transformation throughout the story, using examples from the text to back up your analysis. Examine Matthew's emotions, conflicts and his growth as he adapts to his new life.
- Resilience: Focus on Matthew's ability to adapt and find strength in difficult circumstances. Discuss the challenges he faces after moving to Crawley Point and how he learns to navigate his new environment.
- Conflict resolution: Explore the conflicts within the story, such as Matthew's frustration about Old Bill's secret past, his relationship with his mother, Gary's destructive behaviour, the way Matthew is bullied by the boys at his school and then later by the surfer boys. Discuss how these conflicts are resolved and the lessons Matthew learns from these experiences.

Matthew: Saltwater Boy

Quotes: 'I nodded that I finally understood. Why he'd brought us to that place. Why he'd befriended me. Why he'd taught me how to fish. He was passing on something sacred and important to me. The weight of it made me feel tall and strong.' (p 289)

"You must be a saltwater fella, I reckon. A saltwater boy.' A firm back slap told me this was high praise." (p 61)

- Being a saltwater boy is 'about understanding this place better. Respecting it and taking care of it' (p 387). Why do you think Old



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Bill chooses Matthew to be the caretaker of Crawley Point after his death? What do you think he sees in Matthew? How is Matthew a 'saltwater boy'?

- '... take care of this place. Treat it gently and use the knowledge I've shared with you to teach others to do the same.' (p 365)

How can each of us be a saltwater boy or girl and respect and take care of our environment and teach others to do the same? As a class, brainstorm ideas and create a poster or a campaign that encourages your school and community to take on the role of a Saltwater Caretaker. If you live in a region that is not close to the ocean, create a name for your poster or campaign that reflects your surroundings.

Gary

- What is your first impression of Gary when we meet him in prison (Chapter 5)? What words would you use to describe him?
- Consider the following dialogue between Skye and Matthew:

'Matthew, there are things about him that you don't understand.'

'Like what?' I fumed.

She gave a little sigh of defeat. 'Your father isn't ...' she took a moment to choose her word. 'Your father isn't ... well.' She tapped the side of her temple. 'In here.'

I looked at her suspiciously. 'So that means he gets to treat us however he wants?' I said.

She nodded that I had a point, then said, 'He's trying, Matthew. He really is. He wants to get better. For you. For us.'

(pp 110-111)

- Did this conversation help you better

understand Gary? What do you think Skye might be referring to?

- On p 144, Matthew confronts Gary after the dog has killed the rosella. Gary says, 'It's what animals do . . . they kill each other. Dog eat dog as they say. All the chains in the world ain't going to stop that.' What does this response say about Gary's attitude to life?
- Discuss the significance of Gary having to learn to walk again after the accident.
- Why do you think Gary changes? What words would you use to describe Gary by the end of the story?

Skye

- What is your impression of Skye? There are times when she appears an irresponsible parent. Do you think she is? Why or why not? Re-read the section on pp 56-57 when Skye and Matthew are in the surf. What does this show about Skye?
- Matthew is often very defensive in his interactions with his mother. Do you think this is justified? Explain your answer.
- 'She reached across the table and held my hand like a hostage between hers.' (p 206) Discuss this sentence and what it reveals about how Matthew is feeling about his mother and his life at this point in the story.

Old Bill

- Discuss the character of Old Bill. What role does he play in the story? Discuss how the author uses the character of Old Bill to talk about the importance of caring for Country.
- 'Came down to my word against his, and his word's worth much more than mine in this place.' (p 309). Discuss the way that Old Bill is treated by the other townspeople, particularly Sarge. Examine the repercussions



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for Bill after the car accident and the truth of what happened. Why do you think everyone so quickly accepted that Bill was the guilty party? Why do these attitudes prevail? What can you do to change these attitudes?

- How is Bill different to Gary? Do a character analysis of Bill and Gary. How are they different? What similarities do you think they share? What does Bill teach Gary? How does Bill help to influence Gary's transformation?

Asha

- What role does Asha play in *Saltwater Boy*? In your answer, consider her friendship with Matthew, her relationship with her adoptive parents and her sense of not belonging.
- How do Matthew and Asha find the places where they feel they belong? How are their journeys different and how are they the same?

Family

Curriculum Links: English, Humanities and Social Sciences, Health and Physical Education

Quote: 'Why didn't you just let me drown?'

'Because we're family,' I said, staring deep in his eyes to remind him of the responsibility that came with that.' (p 269)

- Even though Gary is so disruptive and often cruel and violent towards Matthew and his mother, Matthew doesn't hesitate to save him when he is injured in the boating accident. Discuss the role that family plays in the story, particularly in reference to the conversation quoted above.
- Discuss the idea that Bill is also family. What is the idea of a 'chosen family'?
- Why do you think Matthew forms such a strong bond with Bill so quickly?

Connection to Country

Curriculum Links: English, Humanities and Social Sciences

Cross-curriculum priority: Sustainability; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander History and Cultures

'The land is a link between all aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's existence – spirituality, culture, language, family, law and identity. Each person is entrusted with the cultural knowledge and responsibility to care for the land they identify with through kinship systems. Rather than owning land, people develop strong intimate knowledge and connection for a place that is related to them. The intimate knowledge of a place forms this strong connection that is inherent to Indigenous identity.'

'Land sustains Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives in every aspect – spiritually, physically, socially and culturally. The notion of landscape as a second skin is central to a lot of Aboriginal Art, whether it be theatre, dance, music or painting.'

<https://experience.welcometocountry.com/blogs/learning/connection-to-country>

- From the outset, the reader can see Old Bill's connection to and love for Country. Explore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's connection to Country. Using the quote above, discuss how Old Bill's respect for Country is reflected in his words and in his actions.
- Compare the way Old Bill teaches Matthew how to fish (pp 73 – 74 and pp 87 - 89) to the way Gary fishes (pp 175 -178). How does



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Old Bill's way show respect for the ocean and the creatures that live there? What is disturbing about the way Gary treats the fishing expedition?

- 'The notion of landscape as a second skin is central to a lot of Aboriginal Art, whether it be theatre, dance, music or painting.' (<https://experience.welcometocountry.com/blogs/learning/connection-to-country>)

Find a piece of Aboriginal Art that speaks to you in some way and research how this piece of art demonstrates the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander connection to Country and identity.

You might find the following links useful for your research:

- » <https://acca.melbourne/education/resources/contemporary-atsi-art/key-idea-2-connection-to-country>
- » <https://www.aboriginal-art-australia.com/aboriginal-art-library/the-story-of-aboriginal-art/>
- » <https://discover.hubpages.com/education/The-Significance-of-Country-in-Aboriginal-Art>
- » <https://blog.artsper.com/en/a-closer-look/how-nature-inspires-aboriginal-art/>
- In Chapter 23, Old Bill takes Matthew and his dad to a special place. Bill says, 'When the old fellas were still around, they'd bring us boys out here whenever we got into strife,' he said. 'It was somewhere we could come and sort things out. They'd teach us how to fish, hunt, gather bush tucker. But they'd also spend time talking' with us, until we got to the bottom of whatever was makin' us play up . . . We used to come out here when two fellas were quarrelling, too,' Bill continued as he filled our mugs with steaming water. 'Good place to get things out in the open.

Sort out differences.' (p 280)

- Why do you think Bill takes Gary and Matthew to this place? What is the result of the visit?
- Think about a time that you have had a disagreement with a friend or with a family member. Write a journal entry or a piece of creative writing where you and this person are taken to a place similar to Bill's special beach. How does the journey change the situation between you and your friend/family member? What are you forced to face during this time? Does it make the connection between the two of you stronger? Is there a resolution between the two of you?
- Imagine that, instead of punishment, young people today were taken to a place of natural beauty and isolation such as Bill's special place. Do you think this would be a more effective way of dealing with the issues that lead young people to get into trouble? How might teaching young people to live in harmony with Country change the way they approach living in today's world?
- Consider Bill's statement that the ancestors 'belong to all of us that walk the earth down here' (p 297) and 'they've got lots of wisdom to share with you if you're willing to listen.' (p 292) What does it mean to you if the ancestors belong to you, too? What wisdom do you think they have to share with you personally? Discuss with a partner.
- 'The emu is the great creator spirit. She comes out each night to look down on her work.' On p 298, Bill shows Matthew the emu in the stars. Research the way that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people use the stars and the skies to inform aspects of life and culture.
- Discuss the concept of environmental stewardship. How can each of us take responsibility for preserving and caring for



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the natural world? Explore ways you can contribute to the wellbeing of your land and your community.

- On p 95, Matthew reads a headline about the Mabo decision. Research what this high court case was all about. What impact did it have on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?
- Extension exercise: Discuss the current debate around The Voice to Parliament and the forthcoming referendum.

Language

- A first-person narrative is a story told from the perspective of a character within the story. *Saltwater Boy* is a first-person narrative, written from Matthew's point of view. What are the advantages and limitations of a first-person perspective in storytelling in general and in this novel in particular?
- Do you think that the author's use of dialogue between the characters overcomes the limitations of a first-person perspective?
- Choose one of the chapters from *Saltwater Boy* and write it from one of the other characters' points of view. You might choose Old Bill and write about when he first meets Matthew. You might choose a more challenging character, such as Gary. Explore his inner thoughts and motivations as you write from his perspective. Does he become a more sympathetic character if you write from his point of view?
- How would the story be different if it was told from a third-person perspective (where the narrator exists outside the events of the story)? Try writing one of the chapters from a third-person perspective and then discuss your findings with a partner.
- There are many vivid descriptions of the setting, flora and fauna throughout the book.

How do these contribute to your immersion in Matthew's inner and outer world? Identify some of these descriptions in your answer.

Literature

The Old Man and the Sea

Quote: 'Now is no time to think of what you do not have. Think of what you can do with what there is.' Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*

- Matthew finds his grandfather's copy of *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway. Read the novel (suitable for twelve years and over) or find a synopsis of the story and discuss why you think the author may have chosen this particular novel to feature in *Saltwater Boy*. Draw parallels between the characters and the storyline in both novels.
- Re-read the quote above from *The Old Man and the Sea*. How does it relate to Old Bill's wisdom about Country and protecting our environment?

Creative Writing

- Write a journal entry from Matthew's perspective expressing his emotions and thoughts as he leaves his home in Sydney and settles into life at Crawley Point.
- Write a reflective essay on the importance of family, home and friendship, drawing on examples from the book. If you feel comfortable in doing so, share personal experiences or connections you made while reading the story.

The Arts

- Discover one of the many traditional stories behind the different star clusters. Choose your favourite of these and create a piece of



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artwork that shows how the story came to be shown in the stars.

- Find descriptions of the house at Crawley Point when Matthew and Skye first arrive and then descriptions of how it changes through Skye's hard work and creativity. Create an artwork of the house. You might like to show how it changes or create a piece that shows the house when Matthew and Skye first move in or one that shows how it looks by the end of the story. You could make a diorama, a collage using pictures from magazines, a

graphic novel-style series of pictures and so on.

- Create an artwork inspired by *Saltwater Boy*, emphasising the natural beauty of Crawley Point and its surroundings.
- Break into groups and act out a scene from the book, such as the moment Matthew tries to dissuade Gary from boating out beyond the reef, or when Bill tells Gary about the car accident. Explore the emotions and motivations of the characters through your role-play.

About the author

Bradley Christmas is a full-time writer – and moonlighting musician – who splits his time between Sydney and his beloved beach shack on the NSW South Coast. While building his writing career he worked as a social worker, English language teacher and children's entertainer. These days as a freelance copywriter he helps charities like Greenpeace, The Royal Flying Doctor Service and The Sydney Children's Hospital Network share their stories. His short fiction has appeared in a number of magazines and publications including *The Big Issue* and received several award nominations. He can also regularly be found performing around Australia with his country band Copperline. *Saltwater Boy* is his first YA novel.

About the note writer

Belinda Bolliger worked as an editor and publisher of children's books for over twenty-five years. She was the Children's Publisher at Hodder Headline (now Hachette Australia) for 11 years and Children's Commissioning Editor and Publisher for ABC Books/HarperCollins. She has worked with many award-winning authors and illustrators, including Libby Hathorn, Garry Disher, Frances Watts, Judith Rossell and Matt Ottley. Most recently, Belinda was editorial manager for Australian Standing Orders (Scholastic), where she reviewed and selected the most suitable new releases from Australian publishers to send to schools around the country. Belinda now works as a freelance children's editor, project manager and writer.

