



After

By Sue Lawson

About the book

After is a book about the challenges that confront teenagers as they negotiate their way through this period of their lives, and the terrible consequences of reckless behaviour. From a teenage perspective, the book might also be described as being about the pressures they face to be cool.

The novel has a number of themes: coping with tragedy; friendships, especially the ones that aren't good for you; family dysfunction; bullying; peer pressure and the need to fit in and be accepted; the centrality of sport in small rural communities; city versus country.

The story's main protagonist is Callum, a city teenager, who is banished to his grandparents' farm following his involvement in the tragic death of his best friend Nic. He arrives feeling abandoned, unworthy and angry. To make matters worse, his grandparents — for reasons he does not yet fully understand — do not initially want him there. His grandmother is particularly unwelcoming. At the local school he suffers from bullying, once again for reasons he does not yet fully understand. Football, indirectly, caused Callum's crisis; ironically it is football that helps him on the road to recovery, along with his friendship with Benny, a boy with an acquired brain injury. Secrets are revealed, and with his grandfather's help, the healing begins.

After is one of those wonderful hard-to-put-down books that encourages reading and makes it such a pleasure. Thought-provoking and totally absorbing, teenagers should enjoy it immensely. Given the angst that teenagers can experience growing up, and the fraught nature of some of their adolescent relationships, *After* is a story that should resonate strongly with them.

The novel is easy to read with a wonderfully-drawn cast of characters. It is, moreover, well constructed with before chapters interspersed with the other chapters, creating tension and a heightened sense of anticipation as the novel builds to its climax. Highly recommended.

Learning Activities

Introducing the Novel

BEING COOL:

(a) Introduction/Pre-reading task: Read the blurb on the book's back cover

Class discussion:

- What does it mean to be cool?
- Is being cool important? Why/Why not?

Genre

Written and visual information

Reading level

Young adults/ age 13 plus

Interest level

Young adults/ age 13 plus



(b) Role plays

Divide class into small groups and have them prepare and perform two brief comparative vignettes of their own choosing showing the same situation but where one is cool, the other is not.

(This topic will be revisited in the conclusion to the study of the book)

English

GROUP DISCUSSION

You know, it's not what happens to us that shapes us, Callum, it's how we deal with that stuff that makes us who we are (Grandpa Jim Alexander p. 190)

Do you agree? Discuss with reference to the novel.

ANALYTICAL EXERCISE

Pretend you're a psychologist. In pairs, analyse Callum's dreams (pp. 11, 67 & 269-270). What do they suggest about Callum's unconscious feelings about Nic and their relationship?

ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY

Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.

Do you agree with this old saying?

Write an argumentative essay based on your reading of the novel.

Use quotations (with bracketed page references) to back up your arguments.

DEBATE

Topic: Living in the city is better than living in the country.

Debaters must include references to the novel.

BOOK REVIEW

Suggested format:

1. Briefly introduce the book

- Identify the book by author, title and some publishing information
- Mention the book's theme(s)

2. Briefly summarize the storyline.

3. Provide a commentary on the book

- Describe your reaction to the book. For example, did you find it interesting, memorable, entertaining, disturbing, uplifting? Why?
- Comment on the two characters you enjoyed most. Explain why.
- Comment on the author's use of before chapters to tell Callum's story.
- Explain any issues the book raises.



4. Brief conclusion

- Close with a direct comment on the book.
- Would you recommend the book to others? Why/Why not?

SOSE

WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT SPORT?

Football (soccer and Aussie rules) was an important part of Callum and Nic's life at their school in the city and created intense and ultimately deadly competition between the two. In Winter Creek, football and netball were central to the life of the small rural community.

1. Reading media reports in the press

Newspapers and other media reflect the public's thirst for news about sport and sportspeople.

- Over a period of a full week, read the sports pages in the newspaper, paying particular attention to Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday editions.
- Collect three articles/headlines/photographs about sport and/or players that in some way reflect the importance and dominance of sport in our society.

The articles may reflect positively or negatively on sport and sports people.

2. Public speaking exercise

Explain your article choices to the class.

3. Women in sport:

Teacher: Pay attention to how many articles collected are about women in sport.

If women are under-represented, have class consider why this is so.

CLASS PROJECT

Divide class into small groups and allocate activities below, with each group reporting back to the class as a whole at the conclusion of the project.

A: Community involvement

In *After*, the "O" — the Millington City Oval — and the Winter Creek Recreation Reserve were the hub of community activity on Saturdays when people, old and young, from the surrounding district, came together to watch or play netball and football. The harshest punishment teacher Mr Agar could impose on students was to ban them from playing on Saturday for the local footy team, which he coached.



1. Investigate what activities/associations exist in your township, suburb or rural community that provide opportunities for teenagers to participate in their community (outside of school)

2. Survey students in your year level.

- What community activities do they participate in outside of school hours?
- What percentage of students have no community involvement?

3. Students to brainstorm, then decide on a community project for the entire class to get involved in.

Community service or a community participation event.

Obtain teacher's approval, seek other approval that might be required eg. from local council/club, then prepare a plan, allocate tasks, execute plan.

B: Help for those in crisis

Nic's death had a profound and prolonged impact on Callum. His mother Maeve's solution to the crisis was to send him to live with his grandparents on their farm so that he could heal.

- If you suffered a traumatic or deeply troubling experience which was seriously impacting on your relationship with others and on your own self-esteem and ability to cope, where could you go within your local community to seek help to heal?
- Find out about and make a list of what services exist in your community for assisting teenagers who are experiencing a serious crisis.
- As a class decide on how best to make this information available to all students at your school.

C : Disability services

Benny had a acquired brain injury.

What services and social activities exist in your local community and surrounding district for young people who are physically or mentally challenged?

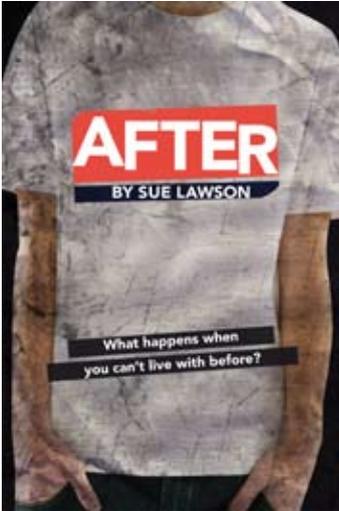
Art

COMPARATIVE EXERCISE

Both Callum and his mum were arty (p.116). So was Benny (e.g. p. 267).

Locate the following artworks on the Internet or in the library

- John Brack Collins Street 5 p.m. (1955)
- Jeffrey Smart Approach to a City (1969)
- Eugene von Guerard Bushfire between Mt Elephant and Timboon March 1857 (1859)
- Tom Roberts, Golden Fleece (1894)



Some perceived differences between the city and country were highlighted in the novel. Compare the above paintings.

1. What do these paintings tell you about the differences between the city and the country?
2. Are there any similarities?
3. Which painting do you like most? Why?

Note: If students cannot access any of the above paintings have them make their own selection for comparison, two urban and two rural.

Concluding the study of the novel:

1. REVISIT THE TOPIC OF BEING COOL

Discuss with entire class:

(i) As a result of reading the novel, have any class members changed their opinion about what it means to be cool, and if it is even important?

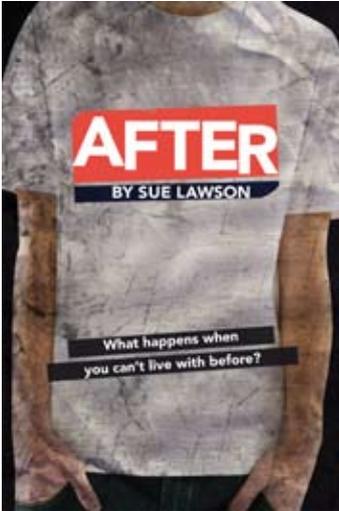
(ii) Consider the following:

- Was the before Callum cool?
- Was Nic cool?
- Were Jack and his gang cool?
- What about Callum's grandpa — was he cool?
- Was Benny perhaps the coolest guy of all?

2. REFLECTING ON LESSONS TO BE LEARNED:

Sometimes our actions have devastating and far-reaching consequences.

- Nic's death was a tragic accident. How could it have been avoided?
- How could Benny's brain injuries have been prevented?
- How could Callum's grandparents have avoided years of estrangement from their daughter (and repaired the rift it caused in their marriage in the process)?
- What positive action might Callum himself have taken to begin dealing with the trauma of Nic's death?



About the author:

Award-winning author, Sue Lawson, grew up on a farm and trained as a teacher.

A daydreamer as a child, she has always been passionate about stories — reading other people's and making up her own.

Her career as a serious writer began after the birth of her daughter. She has since written picture books, books for primary-aged kids and a number of novels for young adults. In addition to writing, she continues to teach and also runs writing workshops for children and adults.

Sue lives in country Victoria with her husband and daughter and loves to watch Aussie rules at the MCG.

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