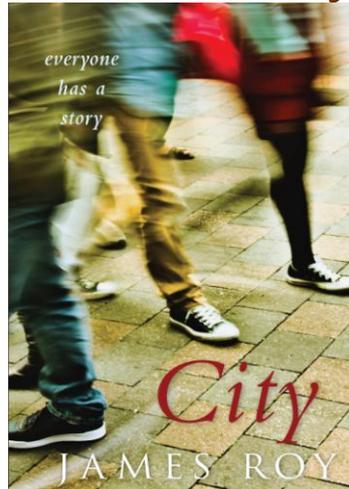


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# CITY

## James Roy



### Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher  
in context with the Australian curriculum (English)

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**SYNOPSIS**

James Roy's *City* is a thought-provoking collection of short stories written in a similar fashion to his recent book, *Town*. From teenage pregnancy to broken families, from racial stereotypes to teenage male bravado, *City* covers the gamut of social issues pertinent to young people. Although some stories and characters become linked by their movements through suburbia and the city, the only character that makes an appearance in every short story is the city itself. Its many identities, stereotypes and folklore provide the background for a variety of human stories that feel all too familiar for readers.

From a classroom perspective, the stories offer unending teaching opportunities – at simple and complex levels – that students and teachers can engage with either during or after the reading process. Overall, *City* is a captivating collection of tales of human experience, which intrinsically shows the links between these experiences and the urban environment that most people in Australia call home.

**THEMES**

- Identity and belonging
- The class divide
- Bohemia
- The city as a character
- Choices
- Religion
- Racial stereotyping
- Teenage pregnancy
- Sexuality
- Dealing with grief and broken families

**WRITING STYLE**

James Roy has provided the following comments:

'The process was quite similar to my earlier collection – I began with a couple of stories that I had written some time ago, and then began to tease out character and setting tendrils, which led to different stories. It then went on to become one of the most "planned" books I've ever written, with notes and diagrams drawn directly onto the window of my study with whiteboard markers, just so I could keep track of how the threads of the different stories worked together.

Some of the stories came in large part from direct experience – the story about the open mic performance night was inspired by a monthly event in Sydney called Penguin Plays Rough. The story 'The Strip' was written some years ago

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after I returned from an evening walk through Kings Cross. Other stories grew from characters I had observed, and objects they might potentially discover (the carwash worker who sifts through the vacuum bag at the end of the day looking for coins and precious items, for instance).

I also wrote some poetry for this book, which was quite a new thing for me. I've had a little poetry published before, but this is the first mainstream release I'll have had with anything resembling poetry in it.'

### QR CODE

The QR code on the back cover will give readers with the appropriate app on their smartphone (such as inigma) a quick and easy way to learn more about the book. The page it links to includes some information about the book as well as a 70-second YouTube book-trailer. From that page the reader can also access more information about James Roy and his work.

### STUDY NOTES ACCORDING TO THEME

#### Pre-reading activities:

- Before reading *City*, write a list of adjectives that you would use to describe cities and city living. After that, jot down some notes on the following topics in relation to cities:
  - Safety
  - Opportunity
  - Social interaction
  - Multiculturalism
  - Values and beliefs
- Can you see any common themes coming through?
- After your pre-reading brainstorming, watch the trailer for *City*.  
<http://www.jamesroy.com.au/City.html>
- What do you think the short stories will be about? Try to predict a few short story plots or backgrounds of the characters based on your pre-reading brainstorming and the trailer. Check to see how close you got after reading the book.

Due to the numerous social issues addressed through the short stories in *City*, a thematic categorisation of issues best highlights the rich content for the

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classroom. Activities may relate to a number of stories, or conversely, one story may appear in numerous categories.

### Identity and belonging:

- Lily, in the story 'Three Dates', feels homesick for her life in North Queensland. What do you think homesickness actually is and what is the fundamental cause of it? Can it be linked to identity?
- Why was Dylan so obsessed with the picture of Lionel Rose in his burning home in 'The Tipping Point'? What did it represent? On a deeper level, why are people's identities often entwined with physical keepsakes?
- Vee in 'Toyota of the Beast' has moved to the city to run away from her life in a country town. Why is the city a place where someone can hide even though they are surrounded by thousands of people? What core social codes of the city differ to those of small or rural towns? Explain your ideas referring to two or more stories in *City*.

### The class divide:

- Do you think that Jonathon and Damien's friendship in 'Uriah's Son' is sustainable in the long run? Explain your answer using evidence from the story as well as ideas based on your own experiences.
- Uriah is a character from the Old Testament (search 'Uriah' online). Why has the author named the short story 'Uriah's Son'?
- 'People will always make assumptions about others based on the way they speak.' What assumptions did you make about characters in 'The Tipping Point' based on their language use? Do you think it is possible for a person to truly 'rise above' their roots if the above statement is true?
- In 'Carwash', the wealthy car owners often treat the car cleaners with disrespect. Is this acceptable? Some people have argued that Australia is a 'classless' society. Do you agree with this?
- In 'Godwin's Law', Rueben can no longer attend a private school due to poor financial circumstances. The nameless first-person narrator says, 'Man, it's like a third-world school' when talking about Rueben's public school. What does this say about the private versus public education system? Does schooling choice relate to 'class' in Australian society?

### Bohemia:

- What does the word 'bohemian' mean? Where does it originate?

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- Poetry is an important motif throughout the collection of short stories. Why do you think the author included the story 'Fliss' in *City*? Would a situation like Fliss' occur in a small or rural town?
- The Poet documents a graffiti artist's attitude towards his work. He believes that his poetry is more than graffiti and adds value to the city. Many characters engage with his haikus throughout the collection of stories. Can you ever class graffiti as art instead of vandalism?

Banksy is a famous graffiti artist in the UK. His artworks are illegal, but very popular, with some local councils leaving them in the community due to public demand. Take a look at the following website to see the type of art he creates.

<http://www.banksy.co.uk/menu.html>

Do you think that the Poet's poetry is art or vandalism? Write an extended analytical response using *City* and Banksy's art as your supporting evidence.

**The city as a character:**

- The three Bus 555 stories show the thoughts of one commuter. Why do you think the author has decided to do this? HINT: Does this character seem lonely in any way?

Why is the bus number 555? Where else in popular culture do we hear those digits together?

- 'The Strip' follows two country kids' walk through the 'red light district' of a city. Their responses to various events show the innate differences of this area of the city and the country. Why do many people associate the city with 'immoral' behaviour? Does the Strip seem too stereotypical? Does every city have an area like the Strip?
- Kyle and the homeless man in 'The Strip' exchange words. Kyle, in a way, tells the homeless man to get a job. Is it that easy for the homeless man to get a job? What are the challenges the homeless man would encounter when trying to find employment? Write a list of these challenges to try to better understand the life of the homeless.
- 'Hotel Haze' is a poem about the city. Does it contribute to the book's characterisation of the city? What is the general feel of the poem?

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**Choices:**

- In the story 'Terminal', J is very open in his discussion about making choices. He knew what he was doing was not in his best interests, but he continued to go through with the drug deal. Why do you think people make choices that will ultimately affect them negatively?
- 'The Driver' shows a sequence of events that could easily have been avoided at any point within the story. Teenagers, particularly boys, are said to lack the brain capacity to make proper choices based on recent neurological research. Read the following article:  
<http://brainconnection.positscience.com/topics/?main=news-in-rev/teen-frontal>
- The above article is just one of many that argues that teenage brain development gives adolescents the tendency to make poor decisions, such as breaking the law or causing harm. What implications does this research have on the application of penalties for law-breaking? Should teenagers be sentenced as adults for crimes? Are there some crimes for which teenagers should be tried as adults? Should Chunks, Jase and Mitch receive punishment for their poor decisions and subsequent law-breaking? Quickly list the crimes they committed and make a judgement.
- For interest's sake, what is Godwin's Law, the title of one of the short stories? Why do you think this phenomenon exists?

**Religion:**

- Vee from 'Toyota of the Beast' and referred to in 'American Pie' is an evangelical Christian who attends Bible College. In both stories, it is suggested that her religious views were the reason that Jefferson ended their relationship. Do you think two people with very different religious views are compatible in the long term? Explain your reasoning. What core values do you think two people need to have a successful relationship?
- Andy turns up at Vee's doorstep and says some confronting things to her about why he thinks she has turned to religion. What did he say? Do you think that he may have a point about Vee? When is religion a part of someone's life as opposed to dominating someone's life? In your opinion, when does religion become a cult?
- Religion is one of the main themes in the story 'Carwash'. Give an overview of Nicky's opinions on religion and the different religions discussed in the story. Do some research into Muslim religion and culture to better understand Jaleel's way of life.

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**Racial stereotyping:**

- If no reference was made to the ethnicity of the two protagonists in the story 'Three Dates', how would you have pictured them? Did you think that Hugh had Asian heritage before it came out in the dialogue? If not, why did you assume otherwise?
- There are numerous characters of different race throughout *City*. They all seemed to speak perfect English in their dialogue. As mentioned earlier, if their race was not specifically mentioned, chances are readers would assume the characters were of Anglo heritage. Why is this so? Is the face of 'real Australia' different to the stereotype developed through the 20<sup>th</sup> century? How would you define someone who is Australian?

**Teenage pregnancy:**

- 'Vulture Days' is primarily about teenage pregnancy and dealing with the social consequences, as well as the pregnancy itself. Do you understand the vulture metaphor discussed in the story? How do you think your friends and family would react if you were to become a school-age mother or father? Would you finish school? Explain your ideas.

**Sexuality:**

- Owen in 'Godwin's Law' is openly hostile to Rueben and the reader does not understand why until the discussion at the end of the story. Why do you think Australian male culture is so against homosexuality? Are attitudes actually changing or does the media and law-making only mask the hostility?

**Dealing with grief and broken families:**

- A number of stories highlight the fact that the characters come from broken families. Did many of these characters seem to still be hurting about this?
- The death of a parent or divorce certainly affects young people in different ways. However, Dr Elisabeth Kubler-Ross explained grief as a set of five stages to help people understand their emotions.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C3%BCbler-Ross\\_model](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C3%BCbler-Ross_model)

Can you recognise any of the stages of grief in the short stories throughout the book? Choose one story and discuss a character's general state of being in relation to the five stages of grieving.

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- The second story's title, 'Terminal', has a double meaning. Read the story and explain what this double meaning is and how it has affected J (the character writing the letter).

### AUTHOR MOTIVATION

James Roy has provided the following comments:

'When I wrote *Town*, I was thinking a lot about the way small communities work. Specifically, I was pondering the way people in towns think they know one another and, even if what they think they know about someone is wrong or inaccurate, they allow it to affect the way they see that person. I think cities are a bit different. We will happily drive across several suburbs to meet a friend for coffee, but know nothing about the lady who lives upstairs.

That is why I changed the way the characters interact in *City*. Oftentimes it is in a superficial way, sometimes it is a random meeting, sometimes it is through a found object. So the challenge was creating a sense of hugeness, community, anonymity and personal contact all at once. And of course, in doing that, I wanted to make the city itself a major character which, like all characters, has good and bad traits, strengths, flaws, shortcomings and moments of great beauty.

I also wanted to make the city of the title anonymous: I didn't want to make it specifically Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, but possibly any and all of those places, even international cities like Berlin or Manchester or New York. I hope that all readers will recognise people and landmarks, no matter which city they live in.'

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Roy was born in country NSW in 1968. When he was very young, his family moved to Papua New Guinea and later to Fiji, where he spent much of his childhood adventuring by day and reading by night. After finishing high school he studied to become a registered nurse, but the urge to tell stories remained strong.

Since his first novel was published in 1996, James has written over twenty books for young people, including the CBCA Honour Books *Captain Mack* and *Billy Mack's War*, several Notable Books in the same awards, and *Anonymity Jones*, which won the young adult category of the Western Australian Premier's Book Awards in 2011. His short story collection *Town* was awarded the Ethel Turner Prize in the NSW Premier's Awards in 2008 and was shortlisted for several other awards, including the prestigious German Youth Literature Prize.

When he isn't speaking at schools and festivals across Australia and beyond, James lives with his family in a creaky 100-year-old house in the Blue

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Mountains, west of Sydney. In his increasingly limited spare time he enjoys music, art and photography.

[www.jamesroy.com](http://www.jamesroy.com)

**AWARDS FOR JAMES ROY**

- *Town* –Nominated 2011 German Youth Literature Award (Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis); Winner of the 2008 New South Wales Premier's Literary Award, Ethel Turner Prize; 2008 CBCA Notable Book; Shortlisted 2008 Queensland Premier's Literacy Awards
- *Anonymity Jones* – Joint winner 2011 Western Australian Premier's Book Awards
- *The Legend of Big Red* – 2006 CBCA Notable Book
- *Billy Mack's War* – 2005 CBCA Honour Book
- *A Boat for Bridget* – 2002 CBCA Notable Book
- *Captain Mack* – 2000 CBCA Honour Book
- *Full Moon Racing* – 1999 CBCA Notable Book