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DAREDEVILS

Bill Condon



Teachers' Notes

Written by Bill Condon

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INTRODUCTION

Jack is an average sixteen-year-old boy leading a fairly average existence. That is until the new boy Anthony Thorne (Thorns) arrives at school with his zest for life and his devil-may-care attitude. Thorns is prepared to back-chat the teachers, stand up to the school bullies, climb on the school roof and play truant. Already grieving over the death of his sister Jodie and her boyfriend in a car accident two years earlier, Jack is horrified to discover that Thorns' bravery stems from the fact that he has a heart condition that will inevitably cut his life short. Thorns is determined to make the most of what life he may have left, especially by completing a daring list of achievements.

Wanting a companion for his adventures, Thorns readily befriends Jack and the two of them soon form a strong and powerful friendship. Over the course of the year they experience a number of typical school-boy issues such as peer pressure and school bullying; new relationships and young love; confronting their fears; being true to themselves; and coming to terms with issues of death and loss. As well as helping to achieve many of the things on Thorns' list, Jack learns a lot about life and ultimately himself as he too comes to embrace life. With Thorns' encouragement he begins to contemplate a list of his own and slowly adopts Thorns' desire to seize every moment. He finally finds the courage to speak to the girl of his dreams, and re-discovers his talent for drawing. He reaches a new level of maturity that enables him to view others differently and to accept and encourage his mother's newly developing relationship.

This is a touching and sensitive story of life, love and loss. Bill Condon's wonderful characterisation and infectious sense of humour keep the novel surprisingly light and highly entertaining despite addressing the serious issues of sickness and death.

CHARACTERS

Jack – A fairly average teenager, whose life appears to be quite uneventful until the arrival of Thorns. *I wasn't unhappy, I was stuck deep in neutral. Not hated by anyone, not loved – unless you counted Mum and my dog Jess – and not even liked or disliked. Some people save the world and some make up the numbers.* (p2)

Lives at home with his mother after his father walked out on the family many years earlier and his sister Jodie was killed in a car accident two years ago.

His life is greatly affected by the arrival of Thorns. *I'd spent my whole sixteen years living safely. It wasn't very exciting but it kept me out of trouble. Now it felt like Thorns was trying to shake me awake.* (p49)

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Yet Jack has a lot more inner strength than he gives himself credit for and in many ways he helps and affects Thorns as much as Thorns helps him.

He matures during the course of the novel – especially in his reaction to Sophie’s rejection and his mother’s relationship with Roger Morris.

Thorns (Anthony Thorne) – Thorns is a wonderful foil for Jack’s more reserved, conscientious character. Whilst he would never do anything to hurt others, Thorns is determined to live life to the full, knowing that he could die at any time. *I don’t want to live longer, I want to love bigger.* (p24)

His reckless, *carpe diem* attitude enables him (and the reader) to cope with the underlying sadness of his illness. It also draws Jack out of himself and brings him to life.

Thorns is very compassionate – he rescues Victor from the rubbish bins and defends him against the school bullies, he falls for Cassandra, and he tries to help his mother cope with his illness.

In many ways he is far more mature than the other 16 year-old boys – he has been with a prostitute, he is unaffected by peer pressure and attitudes, and he has a surprisingly mature attitude to death. *We were the same age, but we were so different. Thorns was like a time traveler kid who’d seen the future and come back a wise old sixteen-year-old.* (p22)

Ruth and Annie – mothers forced to cope with the death of their children. They have an air of loss or sadness, in spite of other relationships in their lives. They are gentle and compassionate women.

Scobie – is a delightful character. He is Thorns’ step-father (although he and Ruth have never actually got around to getting married). In spite of his somewhat rough and ready exterior he is a gentle soul – he never won a race as a jockey as he wouldn’t use the spurs, he won’t use hooks when fishing, and has a ‘do unto others’ philosophy. Yet he throws himself into helping Thorns to achieve the things on his list, finding a racehorse for him to ride, paying for a prostitute so he can experience sex, marrying Ruth, hosting a full-moon party etc. Perhaps being part of the fun is his way of dealing with Thorns’ inevitable death.

Cassandra – *whose face was an acne war zone. Had a temper and wasn’t big on self control. About the only thing she had going for her was that her brains were bigger than her spots.* (p4)

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Cassandra is very self-conscious and prickly because of her appearance and keeps to herself. She spends a lot of time in the library avoiding other students. She initially thinks Thorns is being nice to her just to tease her, but she slowly relaxes and learns to trust him. They begin a very tentative relationship that would have become much more had Thorns not been aware that he was going to die. *I didn't want to start something and then not be around. Wouldn't be fair.* (p174)

Her character will resonate with many students. Through Thorns' kindness we see the softer interior to Cassandra and see the pain and hurt that she suffers from the other students' taunting.

She also allows us to see the compassionate side of Thorns. He is the only student able to look beyond her physical appearance and accept her for who she is. Thorns makes Cassandra feel loved and special.

Sophie – a 22-year-old in a lesbian relationship. She is the subject of Jack's first love and ultimate devastation. Jack's determination to ask her out helps to draw him out of himself and increase his maturity. Her sexuality plays only a minor role and is really only referred to in order to illustrate the hopelessness of Jack's infatuation. She shows a softness and obvious affection for her Grandfather which arguably causes Jack to think more about his mother and her needs. Sophie is the inspiration for Jack to rediscover his drawing ability and introduces the boys to her grandfather, a true character.

Gavin Holland, Rod Herring and Dean Jarvey – the school bullies. These students are instantly familiar with students.

Victor Balenki – *a fat and awkward kid who was saved from the boat heading to Reject Land because he could pull brilliant music out of a guitar.* (p4)

He is the typical victim, overweight and shy. Like many victims, he manages to stand up to and take his revenge on the bullies in the end.

The three Js – Jenna, Jessica and Gemma – are the 'it' girls in the class. They are a complete contrast to Cassandra and, in spite of their attractiveness and popularity, hold no interest for Thorns or Jack.

THEMES**Attitudes to Death**

- Annie's relationship with Jack in the wake of Jodie's death is beautifully drawn. She is protective of him and doesn't want him to grow up too quickly, but she doesn't smother or mollycoddle him.

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- Jack tries to fill the void left by Jodie and to support his mother – he goes bra shopping with her and visits Jodie’s memorial.
- Ruth tries to give Thorns a normal life, but his illness is ever-present – e.g. her upset at the dinner party.
- Scobie helps Thorns to achieve his life goals. He maintains a sense of humour.
- Thorns appears, on the surface at least, to be very matter-of-fact about his illness, but Jack is annoyed when he suggests getting on a train and running away.
- *Dogs run away and hide when they’re sick, but people have to face things.*
- *You love being sick because it’s an excuse for you to do whatever you want.*
- *You don’t run off and leave people who love you. It’s the way life works. You stay even if you don’t want to. You stay for them. (p74)*
- Thorns asks Jack *If you were going to die and you knew it what would you do?* Jack replies *Probably stay in bed and pull the blankets up over my head. I wouldn’t want to deal with it. (p85)*

Friendship

- Jack and Thorn’s friendship is a very powerful and important one. But it is also a very natural teenage boy relationship. Their constant banter, teasing and daring each other is a very realistic portrayal of a teenage friendship. *It flitted through my mind then, as I threatened to thump him, that if something really did happen to Thorns I’d miss trading insults with him as much as anything. (p142)*
- Whilst it is always present in the background, the boys’ friendship goes much deeper than just Thorns’ illness. The boys share their thoughts and feelings with each other in a way that they never could with others. Even though each boy is close to his mother, there are things that they naturally find easier to share with each other.

Bullying

- Like all schools, this one has its share of bullies.
- Their behaviour contrasts markedly with Thorns’ acceptance of all people.
- They also help to show Jack and Thorns’ maturity as they manage to rise above the level of the bullies and remain true to themselves.
- Gavin ultimately tires to make amends for his behaviour because his girlfriend orders him to do so, indicating that the bullies really aren’t as strong and in control as they would like to appear.

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- Whilst their behaviour is never condoned, Condon does allow the reader to see both perspectives as Jack reaches some level of understanding or compassion towards them. *I decided Gavin wasn't so bad. Big toughlooking guys must have their own problems, same as us weedy ones. I suppose you have to kick a few heads or you're not respectable, or respected.* (p150)

Young Love

- Jack's crush on Sophie is very realistic, as is his devastation by her rejection of him. Yet good things emerge from this disaster – Jack starts to draw again, he learns to seize the moment by asking her out, he finds the strength and maturity to cope with her rejection and, whilst the hurt is initially raw, there are indications that he and Sophie will manage to become friends.
- Thorns falls for Cassandra which leaves her with the legacy of improved self-esteem. Theirs is a very tender relationship and a very important one for both of them, only just short by Thorns' death.

DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

- Look at point of view. The story is told from Jack's point of view. Choose one of the key incidents in the novel (e.g. riding the racehorse, the train trip to the beach, the dinner-party at Jack's house, the full-moon party, Jack's accident at tennis) and write up the event from a different character's point of view e.g. Thorns, Scobie, Ruth, Jack's mother, Roger Morris etc.
- Devise your own list of things that you would want to achieve before you died. Consider why these things are important to you.
- At one point Jack accuses Thorns of being selfish and self-indulgent as a result of his illness. Is Thorns selfish? Do you think his behaviour is understandable and/or acceptable? Should sick people be allowed to behave differently from others in society?
- Everyone around Thorns deals very differently with his illness. Make a list of the different attitudes or approaches that are shown in the novel.

Could it be argued that the different genders react differently? Is there a 'right' way to react to death?

- Jack initially has trouble accepting his mother's friendship with his Maths teacher, Roger Morris. What is his initial concern and why does he change his attitude?
- Thorns may be dying, but Jack feels that at times he has barely been living himself. In what ways is their friendship mutually beneficial? What does each boy gain from their friendship?

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- There are a number of different relationships shown in the novel, all of which are quite different. Make a list of the different relationships. What messages does the book convey about life and relationships?
- Consider the ending of the novel. Is it satisfying? Why?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Condon was born in 1949 and lives with his wife Dianne (Di) Bates, in the seaside town of Woonona, on the south coast of New South Wales, Australia. He left school at the first chance he got and worked in an assortment of jobs that did not require much in the way of qualifications. He mowed lawns, cut down trees, delivered parcels, trained greyhounds, worked in a milk factory, drove a forklift truck, and briefly, before he went broke, was a professional punter. All that time he longed to be a writer, the only vocation he felt an affinity for.

In 1982 he wrote a stage play which was produced by an amateur company. Another seven plays followed, including *The Wearing of the Green*, about the famous Irishman Michael O'Dwyer. A chance meeting with Larry Rivera, the editor of a local weekly newspaper, led Bill into a career as a journalist for the next ten years.

Throughout those years Bill was also writing for children, following the example of his wife Di, who is a well known children's author. About ten years ago Bill left journalism to devote himself full-time to writing for children.

He has written more than 80 books, including several collections of plays and poetry, as well as short stories, novels and works of non-fiction. His early work was mainly humorous but in recent years he has turned to writing hard-hitting novels for young adults. Bill also tours schools, giving lively performances to children. When not writing or performing he plays tennis, Scrabble, watches lots of movies and dreams of swimming in his own personal money bin, like his childhood hero Scrooge McDuck.