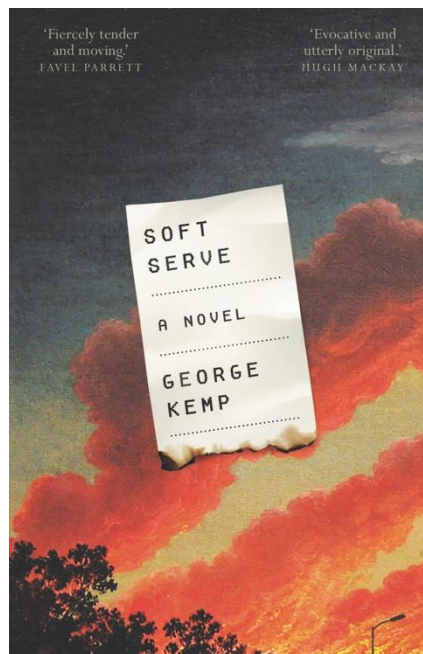


UQP

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

SOFT SERVE

George Kemp



Teachers' Notes

Prepared by Christina Wheeler, who is a practising teacher librarian with a background in the Australian curriculum (English)

ISBN: 978 0 7022 6913 4 / AUS \$29.99

Synopsis	2
Themes	2
Writing Style	2
Study Notes	2
Author Motivation	9
About the Author	10

These notes may be reproduced free of charge for use and study within schools but they may not be reproduced (either in whole or in part) and offered for commercial sale.

80 Meiers Rd
Indooroopilly QLD 4068
Australia

PO Box 6042
St Lucia QLD
4067
Australia

Ph: (+61 7) 3365 7244
Fax: (+61 7) 3365 7579

reception@uqp.com.au
uqp.com.au

University of Queensland Press
ABN 63 942 912 684

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

SYNOPSIS

It's the day of The Ceremony: an annual ritual held at the local Maccas to honour Taz on the anniversary of his death. This is where Fern, Jacob and Ethan drifted on the day of Taz's funeral two years ago, raising a soft serve cone to their friend. Now working as a manager at the Maccas, Taz's grief-stricken mum, Pat, completes her morning rituals at the restaurant, preparing for another shift of serving burgers, McNuggets and hash browns. Today, though, is different. The town is surrounded by catastrophic bushfires, and angry embers threaten the entire region.

Told over the course of one momentous day, *Soft Serve* confronts the group's grief, fears and quiet hopes, from Fern's unrequited feelings for Ethan, to Ethan's secret yearning for Jacob, to Pat's utter sadness. With compassion and honesty, George Kemp explores the fragility of love, the anguish of growing up and the importance of belonging.

THEMES

- Coming of age
- Grief
- Love and relationships
- Bushfires and natural disasters
- Belonging
- Hope
- Self-confidence
- Healing

WRITING STYLE

Shifting between multiple perspectives, the narration of *Soft Serve* delivers a powerful punch as it reveals the inner worlds of characters who are facing the unimaginable. Set against the backdrop of raging bushfires that threaten the rural town of Yinabil, the novel expands beyond its four main characters to paint a portrait of small-town life. While the plot unfolds over one tumultuous day, the author uses flashbacks to reveal the characters' vulnerabilities, frail hopes and unspoken desires to move on. Evocative figurative language, extended metaphors and a clever narrative structure give *Soft Serve* a distinct literary quality. Described by the author as 'drive-thru Chekhov', the text is characterised by deceptive simplicity, blending subtle humour with deep melancholy. Ultimately, it is a compelling insight into the human heart, laying bare the heartache of loss, and the power of love, confidence and belonging. Due to its occasional use of explicit language and its mention of suicide, the novel is best suited to readers aged 15+.

STUDY NOTES

- The author, George Kemp, describes *Soft Serve* as 'drive-thru Chekhov'. Before reading, discuss the Chekhov quote that foreshadows what's to come: 'Borkin: [*Sighing*] This life of ours ... human life is like a flower

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

gloriously blooming in a meadow: along comes a goat, eats it up – no more flower.’ (Anton Chekhov, *Ivanov*) Return to this quote after reading the novel. In an exposition, explain the connections between this quote and the characters, settings and events of *Soft Serve*.

- Examine the cover of *Soft Serve*. How does it capture the intensity of this story? How does it use contrast to address its themes? What does it leave you wondering?
- *Soft Serve* begins and concludes with wakes. Discuss the power of structuring the narrative in this way. How are these two wakes similar and different from each other? How does one reveal the anguish and pain of the past, while the other provides a sense of hope for the future? What has been resolved by the end of this novel? What open wounds remain? Discuss how the author has used tense to transition this story from past to present to future.
- The opening chapter places readers directly in the scene of Taz’s funeral, eliciting sense of grief and disbelief. Discuss the language used by the author to create an evocative and vivid opening to his book. How does this help readers to immerse themselves in this moment?
- What does it mean that ‘Taz had flown over the fence’ (p. 2)? Return to this comment after reading the text.
- At Taz’s wake, we are told that ‘the emotions were too big to fit inside Jacob, Fern and Ethan’ (p. 3). Later, when Jacob queues at the Maccas, he wonders how people could be ‘going about their regular lives on a day like today’ (pp. 3–4). Have you ever experienced this feeling? Share in a reflection.
- Yinabil is depicted as ‘a place where one felt the excitement of a new set of traffic lights going up in town, as well as the sadness about the excitement of a new set of traffic lights going up in town’ (p. 3). Why has this description been placed in parentheses? Using excerpts from the text to support your ideas, create a visual representation of Yinabil that shows the importance of the town’s ‘personality’ to the novel.
- As you read, create a visual collage of the settings presented in the text, such as the township itself, Maccas and Pat’s party. Include images and excerpts from *Soft Serve* to support your ideas.
- In addition to the scenes of Taz’s and Pat’s wakes, *Soft Serve* is told in five parts over the course of one day. As the day progresses, different characters enter the restaurant, bringing with them their pasts, presents and quiet hopes for the future. As you read, track these characters and how their stories connect with the broader themes of *Soft Serve*.
- Each part is followed by a chapter titled ‘Fire’, which takes place in the community as the fire bears down. How does Lotte’s point of view and the different settings give readers a broader understanding of this story?

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- Discuss the use of flashbacks to reveal the characters' vulnerabilities and hopes. Record these on a graphic organiser.
- How does the structure of *Soft Serve* reflect the 'snakes and ladders' of life, as described in the author's motivation above? Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- Why has Pat left her job as a counsellor at the local school to work at Macca's? When starting her day at the restaurant, why does she complete the ritual of '[flicking] switch after switch, powering up herself' (p. 6)? What does this reveal about Pat and her daily struggles?
- When Pat is asked about her strengths and weaknesses during her interview for the role at Maccas, she replies, 'Well, my strength is that I'm still here and my weakness is that I'm still here.' (p. 7) What other examples of wry wit are used in *Soft Serve*? How is this used to deepen the connection between readers and the characters of the story?
- Discuss Pat's disbelief about 'how much the kids cry' (p. 8). What other sharp observations does Pat make? Do you think she understands herself as well as she understands others? Discuss, using evidence to support your stance.
- How is the McDonald's playground used as an important prop in *Soft Serve*?
- We are told that Pat's and Mike's 'individual flavours of grief didn't mix, and they made the mutual decision to get a divorce' (p. 12). Describe how Pat feels about this.
- Lotte is described as 'a rough-booted, tattooed pillar of strength' (p. 14). What are some examples of this strength? In what ways is Lotte vulnerable? Discuss the importance of Lotte's character in *Soft Serve*. How would this story be different without her?
- Consider these lines: 'Pat thinks she's hit the bi-focal patch of grief: everything is a blur and she's unable to make sense of her life through the lens of the present or the lens of the future. It's a kind of fuzzy, nauseating neither.' (pp. 16–17) How does knowing this about Pat help you to better understand her character?
- Why does Lotte say being at The Fox is 'like watching a David Attenborough documentary' (p. 20)?
- The school's motto is 'go confidently in the direction of your dreams' (p. 21). How does this play out in *Soft Serve*? How is this contrasted with the 'gravitational force of the town' (p. 21)?
- Both Pat and Lotte are 'ready to serve'. How are these two women similar and different from one another? Show this comparison using a graphic organiser of your choice. In what ways do they each serve?

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- Why does Taz insist on throwing a party for his mum's fiftieth birthday? How is this party used as a conduit between other parts of the story? What can we tell about Taz's relationship with Pat from these scenes?
- Why does Ethan have feelings of guilt, shame, grief and confusion (p. 33)? How is *Soft Serve* a coming-of-age narrative for him, and indeed for Fern and Jacob as well?
- Jacob, Ethan and Fern are complex characters whose depth is revealed as the novel progresses. Using excerpts from the text to support your thinking, create a character profile of one of these characters.
- When Jacob is fishing, he sees 'an ember dancing down from above' and, in the blink of an eye, 'it has silently and ferociously wrought a patch of angry orange, about the size of a six-pack of beers' (p. 35). How are these embers a metaphor for grief and the limitations of living in Yinabil?
- Pat describes Ethan as meandering 'towards his own self, a destination that remains, as yet, unclear to him' (p. 38). How does Ethan come to realise his destination as the novel unfolds?
- What is the role of the motorhome couple in *Soft Serve*? Why do they bring up these feelings in Pat: 'a strange tension ... Jealousy? Or maybe jealousy's limp younger cousin, embarrassment?' (p. 50) In the role of Pat, write a reflection about how she would feel if she had been in Jacob's car at the end and saw 'the motorhome on its side, scorched and smoking in a ditch, flames licking out from underneath' (p. 168).
- Fern describes her mum as a butterfly (p. 52). How does Angie's nature affect the way Fern lives her life? Why is Fern so determined to buy her own house?
- Why has Ethan been dreading the moment of Fern telling him she loves him (p. 55)?
- When Fern realises her love is not reciprocated, 'she seems to glide in an eerie stupor, as though if she moves too suddenly she'll break' (p. 56). Fern also has 'the same blank look that people have had on the news over the last few days, the ones who have lost everything in the fires – a simultaneous robbing of their accumulated past and their imagined future' (pp. 60–61). Discuss the author's use of language to create a vivid depiction of Fern at this moment.
- Pat uses the line, 'What's the King Brown in your toilet?' (p. 62) to help people identify their stress points. What does she mean by this? What is the King Brown in *your* toilet? Share in a reflection.
- Discuss Fern's exhaustion from 'being constantly bamboozled by the impossible algorithm of happiness' (p. 67). What advice would you give Fern about happiness?
- Why does Fern describe her brother, Jacob, as having a 'choppy shoot-'em-up-game energy' (p. 67)?

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- When Fern sits on a bench outside the restaurant, she says the sting of the hot metal feels good (p. 68). Does she think she deserves to experience this pain, or is there some other reason for this comment? Discuss.
- Why does Fern see herself in the ibis scavenging outside Maccas (pp. 68–69)?
- What is the magic (p. 73, ‘something bright and sad clanging about in there’) that Pat sees in Jacob?
- Discuss this comment that Taz makes: ‘Can’t always be saving for a rainy day, Fern, or you’ll never enjoy the sun.’ (p. 91). How does Taz ‘enjoy the sun’?
- In the role of Pat, write and perform a monologue about the day you’ve spent in Maccas with Fern, Ethan and Jacob. To show the depth of your understanding, include details such as Pat realising ‘she doesn’t have anyone to call’ to tell them she’s safe for now (p. 96).
- Consider this description of Fern and Jacob: ‘One leaning towards connection like it’s a fire giving warmth; the other running madly away in fear.’ (p. 98) How does this exemplify the differences between the two siblings?
- Why does Pat think Fern has been ‘planted in the wrong garden’ (p. 99)? How does Fern eventually epitomise epicormic growth (see p. 101)?
- Which characters in *Soft Serve* can be likened to ‘the snake, who sheds its skin to grow and heal, a process during which its eyesight is weakened and it’s at its most vulnerable. The snake, who rarely stays in the place in which it casts off its skin’ (p. 102)? Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- Why does Fern think she has a ‘tinsel personality’ (p. 110)? Do you think this is true?
- Even though she is hurting, why does Fern hug Jacob and Ethan, ‘[nestling] into them both’ (p. 110)? When Pat sees this, why does she feel ‘a dull throb’ (p. 111)?
- How is Pat a maternal figure for Fern, Ethan and Jacob? How does she use her motherly instincts to help each of them? How is she different from their actual mothers?
- Pat ponders ‘how our most primal evolutionary desire for connection ... has led to an unstoppable digital proliferation ... [and] the fusion of phone to palm has exploded a billion misfired connections and devalued the real thing’ (p. 117). Write a feature article about Pat’s concerns.
- Why is Fern so drawn to the nail salon? What is the appeal for her in ‘placing an olfactory filter over the grime of the world’ (p. 123)?
- Lotte describes how in emergency situations there is often ‘a forced and panicked sorting of past, present and future – an essentialising of one’s life’

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

(p. 131). In what other ways is the notion of past, present and future used in *Soft Serve*?

- What does Pat's romantic encounter with Tony (pp. 140–44) reveal about these two characters and the town they live in?
- Fern remembers waking up to see her mother, 'with the clumsy exaggerated care of a drunk person trying to be sober', trying to surprise her with a chocolate bunny at Easter. This is the first time Fern pretends 'everything [is] fine' (p. 148). When else does she pretend? How does knowing this help you understand Fern better? Have you ever pretended that everything is fine? Share in a reflection.
- How does spending time with Yusuke help Fern (pp. 159–60)? What is the significance of his experience in Fukushima (pp. 155–56) to the wider story?
- When The Ceremony finally takes place (p. 166), what makes it become 'something enormous'? Apart from the wafer cones, how does this ritual resemble holy communion?
- What does Pat's memory of taking Taz to the Jenolan Caves (pp. 181–82) reveal about their relationship?
- When Pat stands at the top of the playground as the fire closes in, 'she knows that this is a battle in which there can be only one winner' (p. 183). Make predictions about the story before reading further, giving reasons for your speculations.
- How does this excerpt convey the intensity of Pat's grief? 'The tree is crackling and popping, and its leaves smell like a hospital ward. Clean and sharp and menacing. What a trick for Mother Nature to play, Pat thinks – to bend her mind back like that.' (p. 184)
- Why does Pat fight so desperately to save the Maccas restaurant (pp. 184–87)? Why is it so important to her? Does she really want to die? Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.
- What impact does this comment of Pat's have on Jacob: 'How about you look at the last twenty-two years as the world's longest ciggie break and get to work, hey?' (pp. 163 and 190)
- Write a reflection on this sentence: 'Life isn't folded laundry; it's the clothes chucked into the washing basket waiting to be cleaned.' (p. 190)
- In what ways is *Soft Serve* a book of contrasts?
- How is plastic used as a motif in *Soft Serve*?
- What is the significance of the title *Soft Serve*? Who do you think this novel is really about? Share your thoughts in a reflection.
- What do you think will be happening in the lives of Fern, Ethan and Jacob in one, five, and ten years' time? Give reasons to support your thinking.
- How do various characters face their reckonings in *Soft Serve*?

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- Create a playlist suitable for a film adaptation of *Soft Serve*. Alternatively, create playlists for different characters in the novel.
- Choose a character from *Soft Serve* to interview. In the role of this same character, respond to these questions.
- In small groups, choose a scene from *Soft Serve* to dramatise. Create a script, props and scenery for your performance.
- Watch George Kemp speaking about *Soft Serve* using the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTzrj-y-jTU&t=3s>
- Discuss the use of figurative language in *Soft Serve*. Examples include:
 - Air so charged it might as well be an electric fence. (p. 2)
 - The smell of fries, warm and thick, enveloped them like a doona. (p. 3)
 - An image floats into Pat's mind of young Gabe out there, with his bowl cut and braces, flailing in the orange wind like a tiny Man from Snowy River as he helps his Driza-Bone mum, Alice, round up their horses. (p. 10)
 - Their sandcastle marriage, already heavy and weak, just needed one rogue wave to collapse it. (p. 12)
 - Nobody knows the details; it just floats around the town like black flittering ash. (p. 14)
 - She takes a sip of her coffee, black like diesel. (p. 19)
 - The nervousness in his dad's voice bubbled up as he spoke with the rhythm of someone reading out IKEA instructions (pp. 27–28)
 - The afternoon heat pulls sweat from his forehead and he feels like a mouse, all shaky and trapped. (p. 31)
 - a lullaby for the sugary sleeplessness of his sticky Fanta mind (p. 35)
 - They're just trying to do the same thing that she is – fill in a sinkhole with a trowel. (p. 38)
 - Pat feels her body tighten, like a dog being sniffed. (p. 49)
 - A patch of cement over the ever-shifting sands of her upbringing. (p. 54)
 - his voice like honey with pepper in it ... trying to hook him in with the graceful arcs of a fly fisherman (p. 61)
 - The crunch of Maltesers sounded like mini-explosions in her heart (p. 64)
 - they all nod and follow Pat to the counter, birds in a nest at the edge of a cliff (p. 94)
 - Fern leaves a breathless voicemail, a floating message in a bottle. (p. 97)
 - Pat gestures towards the hash browns, sweating their fat through their paper coats. (pp. 101–02)
 - beads of sweat leap from the bottom of his orange hair down onto his freckled skin, fittingly typecast as the rebel – the fire the authority figure; the hose his middle finger (p. 104)
 - Something half-clicks inside her, a pilot light of a thought to be considered later. (p. 113)

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- they slowly collapse on the floor, like newborn foals, limbs intertwined (p. 116)
- It's a fire truck. Its music like the curlew's night-time song, protecting the nests of the town. (pp. 126–27)
- the superhuman strength of love defying logic and physics. Wiry-framed Alice carrying the full weight of her steak-and-potatoes husband. (p. 133)
- The image stood out to Taz – a waltz contained within a rap. (p. 136)
- It feels to her like she's struck oil – the black liquid bursting forth. (p. 147)
- Embers whoosh over their windscreen like poisonous bugs. The distance between their car and the truck is like a thin elastic, a lifeline threatening to snap at any second. (p. 167)
- They moved around the marquee warily, bending down to pick up rubbish like two birds pecking at scraps, each ready to fight the other if required. (p. 174)
- She ran out the side door and saw the twisting mass: a power line, untethered from its pole, thrashing around and spitting sparks on her car like an enormous cobra. (p. 180)
- The embers are homing missiles seeking tinder, and they'll find a way. (p. 186)
- She growls and howls, uglily, with all the futility of a staffy barking into a storm. (p. 186)
- She will drive past gaps where houses used to be, like teeth knocked out of a mouth. (p. 191)

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I wanted to write a book about the snakes and ladders of grief and early queer love. How do we navigate life's hook turns when most of the time we don't even know where we were headed in the first place? The characters in this novel are stuck in limbo between their present and their hoped-for future. *Soft Serve* is written for anyone who has snuck in a small six-nugget meal after work, after a bad day, after a funeral. It's short, poetic, tragic, surprising and funny – just like life. It's filled with a Chekhovian longing for something else, somewhere else.

For many people, their early twenties feels like a time of mismatch. Small things seem huge; huge things pass as insignificant. These characters aren't finding themselves – I think they've found themselves but aren't sure they like what they've found. Do they have the energy to try again in a world that seems to be on fire? Without a support system around, how do young people learn emotional regulation, work ethic, resilience in the face of rejection, how to do their tax – in essence, adulthood? These characters are tadpoles with legs: too big for the pool of childhood, but ill at ease in the world outside it. That is rich

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

territory for a story, in which everything feels enormous but enormous emotions aren't cool.

I was interested in setting *Soft Serve* in a regional Australian town. It's harder to lose yourself in a small town: the claustrophobia creates a forced intimacy. So when the stuff of life appears – grief, exploring sexuality, dreams, fears, first love – it can become outsized and epic. There is a theatricality to the sense that everyone is on show. With fewer places to find meaning, the search for it is intensified and people look for it doggedly – in community, religion, the footy team, pub trivia, romantic love. The gap between action and whatever is prohibiting that action is a place rich for drama, both mythic and mundane.

I hope readers get four things out of this novel. First, that they recognise themselves in one or more of these characters: in their pain, their grief, their hopes, their sense of humour, their particular view of the world. Second, a sense of empathy. The next time they see a Pat working behind the counter at Maccas, or a Jacob with a mullet fishing by the river, they think of the enormity of the story that may have led that person there. Third, a sense of admiration and gratitude for the selflessness and bravery of the Rural Fire Service volunteers, who walk into that deadly heat every summer to keep us safe. And, finally, an enjoyable reading experience – an evocative and poetic journey into the lives of these people, who are just trying to make their way through. Aren't we all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Kemp is a writer for stage, page and screen, based on Gadigal land. His award-winning play *Shack* has been performed frequently around the country and internationally, and is included on the new NSW Drama Curriculum. George has had a successful career as an actor across Australia and England, in productions such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Sydney Theatre Company) and national and international tours of *The Play That Goes Wrong* and *Peter Pan Goes Wrong*. He is also a passionate educator and mentor of actors and writers and is currently Resident Artist at Australian Theatre for Young People. *Soft Serve* is his debut novel.