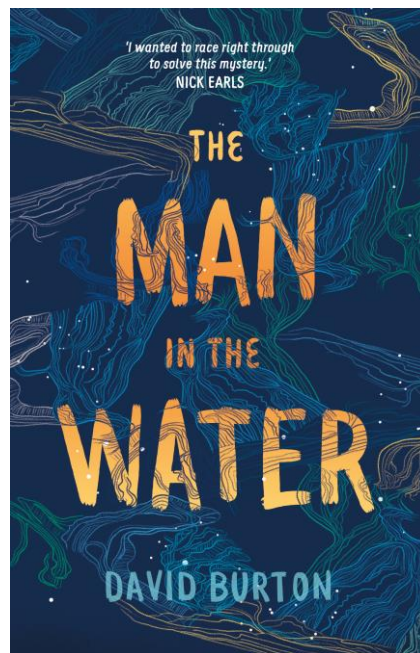


UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

# THE MAN IN THE WATER

## David Burton



### Teachers' Notes

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

ISBN: 978 0 7022 6252 4/ AUS \$19.95

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**SYNOPSIS**

When Shaun finds a body floating in the lake of an isolated mining town, he returns with the police only to find it has disappeared. Determined to prove he is telling the truth, Shaun and his best friend, Will, set out to unravel the secrets behind this unsettling mystery.

His mother, meanwhile, is certain that Shaun's behaviour has been triggered by his father's suicide almost a year ago. Shaun will stop at nothing to become the town's hero by solving this crime.

**THEMES**

- Family
- Friendship
- Honesty
- Loyalty
- Courage
- Trust
- Grief
- Suicide
- Mystery/Adventure

**WRITING STYLE**

*The Man in the Water* is told through the third person narration of fourteen-year-old Shaun. Set in a remote mining town in Queensland's north, Shaun and his best friend, Will, embark on a series of misadventures hoping to uncover clues leading to the death of Tyson Grant. The storytelling is fast-paced and very accessible, and will have broad appeal to YA audiences, including reluctant readers. Sensitivity and due care should be taken when used in classroom settings, as the narrative includes the suicides of two characters, including Shaun's father.

**STUDY NOTES**

- The opening line of *The Man in the Water* is instantly arresting. Discuss the impact of starting stories at the 'moment of change'.
- Why has the author written the first chapter in present tense but the rest of the narrative in past tense? How does this add a sense of urgency and immediacy to the discovery of Tyson's body?

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- What are your first impressions of the police officers? How do we know how Shaun feels about them? How does your perception of Baker and Charlie develop as you read *The Man in the Water*?
- How would you describe Shaun and Will's friendship? Why are they so compatible? How does Megan fit into their world?
- Why does Shaun feel it necessary to lie about Tyson's head injury? Why does the author include this plotline in the text? How does it help create tension?
- We are told that Shaun's dad has left, only to later discover that he has died. Why has the author withheld this crucial information until later in the text?
- As you read *The Man in the Water*, keep a list of the various clues Shaun and Will find. After completing the text, write an explanation that connects the clues to the case.
- How effective is the choice of setting for this story? Discuss the important role that setting plays in narratives.
- Why is Shaun's mum so insistent that he see a counsellor? Why is Shaun so reluctant to go?
- Why does Shaun sense that people in the town look at him with 'sadness and pity' (p38)? How does this make Shaun feel?
- When Megan hears of her brother's death, Shaun comments that he 'felt like he had seen her naked. She didn't seem to care, and that made it worse' (p62). What does Shaun mean by this?
- Why do Shaun and his mum continue to live in the town that has brought them so much heartache?
- What is the symbolism behind Shaun's mum trying to control their overgrown garden?
- Why is Peter Grant so angry with the mining companies? What messages about workers' rights and conditions are shared in *The Man in the Water*?
- Megan and Shaun kiss when he has dinner at the Grants' house. Why does she apologise and say she just wants to be friends later in the text? How are some of Shaun's actions influenced by his feelings for Megan?
- What actions of Shaun's are you critical of? Why? What advice would you give Shaun if you were his friend?
- Why does Peter Grant smash Shaun's letterbox and window? How does this prompt Shaun to put things right?
- What role does Millie play in *The Man in the Water*? Why is she an important inclusion?
- Before reading Chapter 28, make predictions about the boys' stay in Henry Simms's home in Brisbane. Why has a visit to Brisbane been included in the text?

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- Shaun says he has a 'messy tangle of clues' in his mind (p157). Before finishing the text, try to solve this mystery with a partner. Like the boys, create a timeline of the events surrounding Tyson's death, in particular, Peter's attack on Simms.
- Discuss the recurring motif of the film playing out in Shaun's head. Why is this an effective literary device? How does it thread the various plot elements together?
- With a partner, recreate and flesh out the scene in which Shaun watches the funeral from the old car, with ghost-Tyson sitting beside him.
- Why, when Shaun looks to where ghost-Tyson is, does he see nothing but 'shattered glass' (p160)? How is this a metaphor for the past twelve months of Shaun's life?
- Why is Shaun motivated by the prospect that 'Glory might still be possible' (p161)?
- Draw a diagonal line on a piece of landscape A3 paper. Using the descriptive passages on p164 of Brisbane and p201 of Shaun's hometown, sketch a comparison of these two settings.
- Using aerial photos of other settings, write your own piece of description, including imagery, to depict a setting.
- What were your impressions of Simms telling the boys so much about his childhood when he hardly knew them? How does this scene fit into the overall plot?
- Discuss the contrast between greed and fairness raised in *The Man in the Water*. Why are these themes relevant to YA literature?
- Why does Shaun feel he can 'never be a hero' (p197)? Why is this so important to him?
- Why, after so much time, effort and risk, does Shaun feel 'sad' and 'empty' (p239) after solving the crime?
- What is the significance of Shaun reorganising his dad's CD collection?
- In what ways is *The Man in the Water* a story about friendship?
- Write a chapter from Will's point of view.
- In small groups, choose a scene from *The Man in the Water* to script and dramatise to your class.
- With a partner, create a storyline and set of clues for a mystery of your own. Write this mystery.

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**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

*The Man in the Water* is a book for teenagers. It was inspired by my trips to regional and remote towns throughout Queensland, such as Moranbah, Dysart, Middlemount, Nebo, Clermont, Gladstone, Logan, Mount Isa and Glenden. While working there, I often found the teenagers in these places had wonderful, disturbing stories to tell. Country kids are imbued with a sense of independence and resilience that's often missing in their metropolitan peers. I wanted to create characters that were brave and focused in that same way.

I also wanted to weave a story about this part of Australia, which is often forgotten and used as a political football. When we talk about huge projects like Adani, or the price of coal, we're actually talking about people's lives in these communities. For these kids, it's their experience of their home town.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

David Burton is an award-winning writer from Brisbane. He has written over 30 professionally produced theatrical works, including several pieces for the youth and education sector, and directed productions for the Queensland Music Festival. His memoir, *How to Be Happy*, won the Text Prize for Young Adult and Children's Writing in 2014. *The Man in the Water* is his first novel.

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