Notes on *Mateship with Birds*

**WINNER OF THE 2013 STELLA PRIZE**

The girl Dora might be water, but his Betty is oil. You can’t take oil lightly.
It seeps into your skin. It marks you.

Carrie Tiffany, *Mateship with Birds*

**SYNOPSIS**

Harry is a quiet farmer who comes from generations of dairy farmers. He spends his time daydreaming, milking cows and bird-watching. Next door lives Betty, who moved to the country some years earlier to build what she hoped would be a better life for herself and her two fatherless children. Almost since the day they moved in, Harry has been a constant in the lives of Betty, Michael and Little Hazel.

Harry is shy and quietly poetic, a dreamer with a good heart. Despite the lack of variation in his daily routine, Harry doesn’t find his life at all monotonous. To him, the cows have distinctive personalities, and he is tender-hearted and gentle as he goes about milking them. He finds beauty in his natural surrounds and closely watches the birds, particularly a family of kookaburras, whose behaviour he notes down in the margins of his farming journal. He possesses a strong desire to help those he cares about, although his shyness often makes it difficult for him to do so.

Betty is a hard worker, determined to support her children. She is glad to see Harry and her son, Michael, spending time together. She feels keenly the judgement of people in the town and is happy that her son has found a father figure of sorts. Michael is of the age where he is discovering the opposite sex, and has just begun a relationship with a girl from school. Harry feels duty-bound to offer some fatherly advice and inform Michael of the facts of life. Being shy, though, and not wanting to embarrass Michael, Harry decides to write the boy letters. Along with information gleaned from library books and his own childhood experiences, Harry’s letters draw on what he has observed in birds and cattle. He leaves these notes for Michael, imagining that he is saving the boy from the cruelty of ignorance.

Little Hazel is the more boisterous of the two children, and the more prone to getting into trouble. A young girl still yet to enter adolescence, Little Hazel can see certain truths about adults but is not quite old enough to make sense of them. Early in the book, she has an unsettling encounter with their neighbour Mr Mues that she doesn’t reveal to anyone, writing it off as part of the strange, frequently sad behaviour of grown-ups. When Betty finds one of Harry’s letters to Michael, she assumes the worst.

Generally, though, the tone of this book is peaceful, setting a gentle pace that mirrors the easy relationship

**CONTENT ADVICE**

*Mateship with Birds* contains a certain amount of graphic sexual content. We are aware that this will present an issue for some schools. As such, schools may prefer for their students to study just select portions of the book in isolation. These notes have been written accordingly and page numbers have been provided for recommended sections of the text.
its characters have with the landscape. This peace is echoed in the conclusion of the book, which sees a generally happy ending for the characters, and the beginnings of a relationship between Harry and Betty.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

CARRIE TIFFANY was born in West Yorkshire and grew up in Western Australia. She spent her early twenties working as a park ranger in the Red Centre and now lives in Melbourne, where she works as an agricultural journalist.

Her first novel, *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living* (Picador), was shortlisted for numerous awards including the Orange Prize, the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the *Guardian* First Book Award and the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize, and won the 2006 Dobbie Award for Best First Book and the 2006 Western Australian Premier’s Award for Fiction. *Mateship with Birds* is her second novel.

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THEMES

Place
Landscape
Loneliness
Poetry
Nature
Animal behaviour
Kinship
Adolescence
Sexuality

LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

Readers of this text will require a mature understanding of the content, so any in-depth study of the book will offer significant opportunities for *critical* understanding. Additionally, there are several incidents within the book that could inspire a discussion on *ethical* behaviour, if deemed appropriate.

Given the instances of graphic content, teachers may consider this book inappropriate to be read in full. If this is the case, classes could nonetheless study portions of the book to examine the links between the text and the cross-curriculum priority of *sustainability*. The characters’ affinity with the landscape, and the animals inhabiting it, provides plenty of fodder for discussion of humans relationship with the natural world, the impact of farming on the Australian landscape and the future of rural communities.

READING QUESTIONS

In case schools prefer to study just select portions of the text, these questions have been split into three sections – Writing Styles, Themes and Characters – with relevant page numbers provided.

Writing styles

✦ Poetry (pp.130–137)

In this section of the book, Harry starts recording his observations of the kookaburra family in his farming journal.

– How are the verses here broken up?
– What is the effect of the spacing on the text?
– What style of verse is this?
– What imagery does Harry use in the verses?
– What human characteristics are given to the kookaburras?
– What is it that makes Harry’s observations so poetic? Is it just the writing style, language and format? Or is it the detail, which is only possible because of the amount of attention he has paid to what he’s observing? Try choosing something that you see regularly – it could be an animal, place, object or person – and write some verse of your own describing your observations of it. Are you surprised by what you’ve noticed by paying close attention?

✦ Journal (pp.148–150)

Hazel’s nature diary is part of a school project. Like Harry’s verse (see above), the writing is
observational, but the style is journal writing rather than verse.

- What are the stylistic differences between Hazel’s journal writing and Harry’s verse?
- What are the similarities?
- Is one style more poetic than the other?
- How is Hazel’s age conveyed in her writing?

### Themes

#### Animal behaviour and the natural world (pp.130–136, 176–182)
- What observations does Harry make about the kookaburras in these segments?
- How do kookaburras parent their young?
- In what ways is the kookaburras’ behaviour similar to human behaviour?
- In what ways is it different?
- What do Harry’s observations tell us about the connection between animals and their environment?
- What issues does this connection raise regarding sustainability?
- Create a sustainability map using the connections between animals and land in these verses as a starting point. Add in other animals that might be found in the area, noting their likely impact on the land and other animals. Then add people, buildings and technological infrastructure. Try to identify how each of these elements would impact on each other.
- In his notes, Harry presents the animals as familiar, almost human, and one of the ways that he does this is by referring to them as ‘Mum and Dad’ or ‘male and female’. Carrie Tiffany has referred to this as ‘trying to relate to nature in a way that’s lyrical but that makes it a family you’re a part of’. What are the benefits of this approach? What are the limitations?

#### Little Hazel (pp.71–2, 107–111, 147–151)
- What do we learn about Hazel from these segments?
- How is her isolation apparent?
- Do you think she is unhappy? If so, what suggests this?
- What does Hazel want?

#### Betty (pp.35–38, 170–172)
- How is Betty portrayed as a mother in these sections?
- What does she worry about?
- How does she feel about herself?
- What kind of person is she?
- Why is she so hurt when Michael calls her a spoon?
- What example does she wish to set for her children?

### Extension Activities

Choose one of the characters and, using what you know about them from the segments provided, flesh them out more. In a creative scene of around 1000 words, write a moment from their past that is hinted at in one of these sections but not described in detail.

### References

**Reviews**

- The Guardian
  www.theguardian.com/books/australia-culture-blog/2013/jun/12/miles-franklin-award-mateship-birds

- The Sydney Morning Herald
Interviews
Readings

Ramona Koval

LiteraryMinded