

## TEACHER'S NOTES

WRITTEN BY PAM MACINTYRE



# Thursday's Child

## Sonya Hartnett

This story, documenting tragic events in the life of the Flute family, is told by Harper, a child of six when the book begins and aged twelve when the events finish. The family lives in poverty on a small unforgiving property with its prospector's shanty, provided for them by the government for returned soldiers, after the First World War. Da had not wanted to fight and has been profoundly affected by what he experienced in the trenches. He dreams that they will find 'relief and serenity' in the countryside but they are not farmers and it is a hard life in a harsh environment. The family survives by trapping rabbits, selling the pellets and eating the meat, being unable to get anything to grow on their land. When the book opens, they are poor but optimistic about their future survival in a friendly community.

After the birth of the youngest child, Caffy, which occurs simultaneously with the near death of mute Tin, the second youngest aged four, Tin decides to live under the house, eventually constructing a labyrinthine network of tunnels in which he spends most of his time. Global events are mounting to the 'tidal wave' of the Depression, and in parallel, for the Flute family events are building to bring them to the brink.

Harper recollects these tumultuous and tragic years in her family's life from the distance of adulthood. But it is also her rite of passage story, from childhood to the cusp of adolescence. While she is an acute observer of people, events and her physical surroundings, her understandings of the world are partial, often made too quickly and often wrong. One of the first questions asked by this book – which, as all good literature does, raises many questions – is how reliable is Harper as narrator?

While the story is told by Harper, it focuses on the lives of the males in the family, Da, Devon, Tin and until his early death Caffy, though he remains as a presence and impetus for further action. In this rural setting just before the Second World War, the supremacy of the male is not challenged: even when Da's visions for the future are exposed as worthless daydreams Ma stays. When Cable violates Audrey, Tin exacts violent revenge. This is in contrast to Devon's self-sacrifice – a stereotypically female virtue – to provide a solution to the problem of Audrey working for an increasingly predatory Cable. In the novel Devon's act is ineffective before Tin's emphatic solution.

Another question then asked by this book is our response to this portrayal of being male, to the picture of men and how they are constructed. Consider the story on page 65-66 about Da and his father's relationship, his feeling that he was sent away to die, and ideas of cowardice and manliness.

### Title

The title of the book as alluded to in the opening sentence, comes from the nursery rhyme:

Monday's child is fair of face,  
Tuesday's child is full of grace,  
Wednesday's child is full of woe,  
Thursday's child has far to go...

- Apart from the obvious literal reference to Tin's tunnelling, how meaningful is it in terms of Tin's character in the book, and as a title representing the whole narrative?
- There are other sayings and rhymes that are brought to mind by the story too, as well as Biblical resonances, such as the parable of the man who built his house upon the sand, and then upon the rock. One might argue whether the book confirms the wisdom of that parable, or mocks it.
- Perhaps Tin can be seen as a version or subversion of, or a comment on the prodigal son: he is well established in the text as Da's favourite.
- The new house with shutters and shiny weatherboards, 'a palace', suggests that all that glitters is not gold! (p104)

Can you find in the novel, any other suggestions of parables, fables, or proverbs?

## **Fate and structure**

The opening sentence tells us that Tin was 'fated to his wanderings' and from the outset this is alerting us to a major idea in the novel, that there is destiny and pattern to events in which people are mere players. This theme is plotted into the very structure of the novel where a sense of everything being connected and planned rather than capriciously or randomly occurring is built up, particularly through the use of **foreshadowing** of events. Also characters often pronounce on cause and effect, Mrs Murphy acting like a prophet at times. On page 27 she expounds that Tin's tunnelling behaviour is a result of his displacement by Caffy. 'I know jealousy when I see it ... I'll be proved right, time will tell.' And she is, isn't she, when the shanty falls in?

The following are all examples of deliberate foreshadowing by the author:

- page 2 'It's proper I mention Caffy because Caffy was born the day Tin learned to dig and everyone says if it hadn't been for Caffy coming then things might have been different...'
- p31 'And when a day came that proved Caffy's coming and Tin's going had nothing to do with jealousy but were coincidence and nothing more, it was much too late for me or for Da or for anyone, to change his ways, even if we wanted to.'
- p185 'I try to forgive myself because I didn't know about it then. If I had known, I would have tried to inscribe things more deeply in my memory. And I would have made myself more cheerful, too, because you can always make the effort to savour the final moments of anything.'

Then there are events that although not overtly linked by the author suggest the relationships between actions. For example on page 16 Devon is described as having great faith in the unsuccessful miner who formerly lived on their property as 'being unlucky rather than deluded' and as the final pages show us he was right.

Also in the final pages when we recollect that Tin had been seen all over the district, had stolen honey from Vandery Cable's hives, listens and knows about what is happening to the family, his actions, while shocking, are not gratuitous but related to the series of events that have precipitated them, although he has not been a major player in them.

This foreshadowing coupled with allusions to and the acceptance of 'the hand of fate' permeates the novel. For example on page 16 Mam says of the neighbours who can grow crops in the harsh land that they are 'more blessed'. This idea of accepting what life has handed out is set against the futility of trying to influence destiny, particularly through dreams. Devon dreams about having a horse, one he will call Champion, and while he does get it, the circumstances sour the thrill for him, and eventually lead to his selling of Champion. He has a dream but is it worth it? Da's modus operandi is based on unrealistic visions of the future – it is almost his mantra – and an inability to deal with the present, all of which have disastrous consequences. Harper's dream of moving to the city to live in her grandfather's

house, where there will be physical comfort and a new life, is exposed as the greatest fantasy of all.

'Looking back, life seems in its way, like a fall from a great height, the outcome decided even before the event is begun.' (p223) Is this an analogy for the whole book? Consider where the characters, such as Devon and Izzy are now, and what their future and the future of society is going to be. Is this an optimistic view? Put it against the last sentence in the book 'His hand will be dirty when he places it in mine, and mine will not be clean.' What do you think now?

However, the book also talks about freedom. Page 31 says Tin was set free to do as he pleased which again queries the nature of freedom or if such a thing as true freedom even exists. 'Tin never had to answer to being grown up.' Is that a type of freedom?

## **Narrator and voice**

*'Memory is eccentric, how it stalls when it wants to.'* (p1)

This quote from the very first page of the book immediately alerts us to the uncertainty of the narrator. Hartnett has chosen a child of six years as the chronicler, a device to limit the point of view, though Harper, conveniently, is an eavesdropper. What does limit her view? Find examples in the text. However, she is simultaneously an adult recollecting events, which poses some discrepancy of voice. For example, on page 26 Harper says of Mrs Murphy, 'She knew a good deal about children, especially considering she had none of her own.' Is a child of six capable of such irony? If not, who is speaking? The adult Harper? The author? What about in this instance on page 32: 'Time passes slowly when you're young, and quickens as you get old'. Who is saying this? And another example: on page 11 Harper says 'it is the horriblest, loneliest, saddest memory I own.' – the vernacular of a child – and then three lines later: 'Tin had been entombed for easily half an hour'. Is this movement from child to adult narrator effective? Disruptive? Does it have a particular purpose, do you think?

Harper is witness to the evidence of Tin's murder of Vandery Cable, and imagines in vivid, gory detail the actual blow of the pick-axe handle. Yet she remains in childish ignorance of what actually happened to Audrey: sexual matters are taboo. What does this suggest about the society's/family's values and conception of childhood? Is it any different today? Are we meant to see the world as hypocritical, and is this setting us up for the final deception at the end, one that Audrey eventually persuades herself is the true version?

Harper puts words in the mute Tin's mouth. For example on page 24 she says:

*'You liked it, didn't you, Tin? Yep, you liked it, that dark. Da came running and so did Devon and I was running too, we were thinking you'd been killed under all that muck and by rights you should have been but you weren't, you weren't even frightened. You liked it, you thought it was fine...'*

Is this a fair interpretation of Tin's psyche, or is it more revealing of Harper's? Construct the events from another character's point of view. Is Harper trustworthy? There are instances when she has been proved wrong. For example, she is convinced that Tin is dead under the mudslide (p9) and yet he isn't. Can you identify instances when you suspect her version of events? What other interpretations could you put on behaviour?

Tin is covered by the creek bank: 'A chunk of earth had been sucked away from its roots and had left behind a cave that closed Tin up and kept him snug and safe as a nesting bird, if slightly damp and tickled.' (p12) This is Harper's construction of it, Tin never speaks so we don't know how he felt, but

we accept that this is the start of his affinity with the underground and his saving of himself by digging his way out. How reliable is Harper as a narrator? How often in the text does anyone dispute her version of events? Look at the evidence. She says 'I knew' but earlier she had said the same thing about Tin being dead and he wasn't. Is the author setting us up to distrust her as a narrator, or query her interpretation?

## Landscape/Nature/Seasons

*Sonya Hartnett's writing almost always leaves me with a strong resonance for both the emotional and physical landscape of her characters in their settings, more so than for the chronology of her stories or the detail of her characters. For me, the pages of her novels have a pungent and lingering odour of place, of state of mind, of concealed truths and of an endless struggle between the hope and hopelessness of circumstance and opportunity for those souls who inhabit her vividly imagined and often disturbing stories.*

Chris Thompson in *Viewpoint* 7 (3) Spring 99 p30.

Although Chris Thompson is not referring to this novel, you might like to use this quotation to consider the role of landscape in *Thursday's Child*.

- Think about the harshness of the seasons and their relation to when events happen, the adversarial, even malevolent descriptions of nature, the description of the house on page 4 to the change on page 218 to 'tender spring days'. Has spring been mentioned before? What does this change symbolise?
- 'The weeks and months have seeped into each other and become a span without feature and detail, riddled with cavernous holes.' (p32) Time, life and memory are described in the language of landscape.
- Harper sees the rain as purposeful (p54). Is nature malevolent?

From early colonial novels, the depiction of rural life in Australian literature operates within a strong tradition of the pastoral. It portrays the bush as a healing, green place, full of camaraderie and bonhomie, as in the works of Henry Lawson. There have been those who see it differently – Barbara Baynton for one. Where do you think Sonya Hartnett is placed? You should consider this in the light of *Sleeping Dogs* and *Stripes of the Sidestep Wolf*.

The change in the seasons is accompanied by shifts in tone in the novel. Until the shanty collapses it is one of optimism and happiness, despite the poverty. After Caffy's death there is a shift in mood and tone, as there is after Audrey goes to work for Cable. It is almost like a storm brewing: a slow and inevitable building to something dark and tragic.

- Examine how this is effected in the text.

## Genre

This novel defies easy categorisation. While the events are located historically and geographically, it would be difficult to feel entirely happy with the term 'realistic'. Neither is it fantasy. The distilled action, the focus on detail such as the 'silken breeze frolicked through Da's hair' but made no impression on Cable's which had 'been oiled into a glistening cap' (p49), the centrality of the family's interactions, and the rejection of details of school or life outside the close focussed lens suggests super-realism or hyper-realism. For example, we know that Tin couldn't construct or live in the tunnels, and yet we believe he does on the page.

- Think about the choice of names: Da, Mam, Devon, Harper, Tin, Caffy, Vandery Cable, Grandda, Izzy, and their role in colouring our expectation of the book. Contrast them with Jock Murphy, Rose Murphy, Mr Sullivan, Mr Godwin, the other characters in the book - the contrast between the familiar and the ordinary, and the unusual and unexpected. Do these names predispose us to accept the more bizarre elements of their lives?

## Language

The imagery in the book is strong, powerful and lingering. We literally see Tin digging out Caffy, smell the bloody, slaughtered hogs hanging in Cable's shed and yet the prose is not purple but direct and simple. To achieve this Hartnett uses invented, evocative words such as 'clickering with the cold' (p7) and 'squallering' plus many effective similes that put together images in surprising ways. For example:

- p8 'my arms moving like legs running ...'
- p33 'In summer when the heat was such that you could see it like a ghost or a genie, wavering and writhing without being visible at all.'
- p83 'as if someone had taken a hacksaw to the sky ...'
- p83 the shanty being down 'like a hat blown from the head of a giant ...'
- p85 'the floor ... was made choppy as the sea ... the jagged breaks like devil's hands'.
- For the characters there are constant similes and likenesses to animals. 'But at the table we sat uneasily, like dogs tied up together who aren't companions or friends.' (p165) Vandery Cable is likened to a black beetle; Tin has claws and snarls, and on page 210 is likened to a tiger.
- Find some more – there are many. Why does the author consistently draw these comparisons? What does this suggest about the book's attitudes and themes?

The language also operates symbolically. When Harper falls into Tin's tunnels and has a tortuous journey to the surface it is like a birth, and also a second coming after death: the underworld is like a coffin or tomb '... hideous thoughts flocked like crows to a corpse ...' and there is imagery of the birth and the womb as well in the 'smooth walls' of the tunnel. 'I stayed as sightless as if I'd been born without eyes.' (p197) The travail of Harper's journey is very like the struggle of being born. On page 199 she says, 'I sounded like a baby.'

Consider how Harper's longing for the beach, the sea, the coast is built up gently in the text until on page 207 '... I remember how it took my breath away to see it for the first time, how I felt, at the sight of that never-ending greatness of water, somehow drowned to see it all.' What does water symbolise and the imagery suggest? For example, cleansing, ever changing, and in Harper's view it heralds a place which is characterised by benign nature: 'Here the strew from the cypress trees makes the earth light and feathery and it crumbles and smells sweet in your hand.' (p208)

The sea and the coast are important in Australian writing and psyche: most of us reside on the coastal borders. Consider how the sea is used in the writing of Tim Winton, or in the books for young adults such as Gillian Rubinstein's *Beyond the Labyrinth*, for example.

Language is also used to suggest the time of the book's setting:

- p33 Devon finds a 'deener' on the road. What is it?
- p148 the 'travelling salesmen' refer to the 'sustenance'. What are they referring to?
- p93 Mrs Murphy talks of a 'new fandangle ice-chest', not a refrigerator.
- p28 Tin is asked if he wanted to 'chew the orange rind'.

What other examples of antiquated or period specific language can you find in the text? Does this confirm the 'otherness' of the Flutes, their difference from us now, or is it simply operating to create a sense of actual time period?

### **Ideas to explore**

This is a book that invites a lot of questions but does not necessarily answer them. It is a book that prompts thought about a wide range of ideas, some which you might explore:

- p13 Caffy, as a new born has no meaning, is 'a nothing'. Is that why Da is willing to bargain his life for Tin's? Do you agree that Tin is more valuable as a human than Caffy? That we are all 'nothings' at birth?
- p40 Mam says, 'Life's not been deliberately cruel to him. Life isn't like that – only people are.' Do you agree? Do events in the book support or subvert that view?
- p63 Devon gets his pony and Ma says he's had 'the last laugh on Mr Cable. You got your horse without him, after all.' Does this imply a balance sheet of justice? As against life isn't meant to be fair? Or is it Ma's view as against Da's?
- p64 Audrey's view of fairness and justice is different. Why has Devon been singled out for no reason? Why should he get what he wants and the others go on the same as before? This prompts Harper to see the world from another point of view. And then Devon asks why Da didn't get the money and the story of the war comes out. This makes Devon change his mind about taking the money. Is Audrey right? Does Devon make the right choice in giving the money to Da?
- pp155-6 Rose Murphy says (note the change from Mrs to Rose), 'The angels have turned their faces from your family, these last few years. It began when that boy started digging and it's gone on from there.' Harper replies, 'Maybe Tin only started digging ... because he knew the angels were about to turn away.' What do you think? Does your reading of the novel support one or the other, or do you think there is a completely different explanation for the events; for example, ineffective parenting?
- p173 Devon says, 'It's good that you're brave. You shouldn't let yourself be frightened, Harper. People who let themselves be frightened, they're defeated before they've even tried. Being cowardly never changed anything. It's being brave that makes the difference.' Is that supported by events in the novel? Does it apply to what Tin did to Vandery Cable? How Da and Harper conceal what they know? Is self-sacrifice, like Devon's sale of Champion, brave?
- p200 Harper suggests that Tin might have murdered Caffy or at least allowed him to die. Is that her own guilt projected onto him? Do you suspect Tin at this stage? Does it undermine your previous view of him? What about his role in ejecting Harper from the tunnel, his role in her rebirth? (p203)
- p204 '...I found myself deep in scrub and then, pushing through it, standing on the edge of the road. I smiled amiably at it, as though it were my oldest friend, and sat down to rest a while.' Consider the significance of this change in Harper's attitude to the bush that had before dragged and scratched at her.
- Will the family ever be free of the lies and the deception they have created around Cable's death? Are they right to place loyalty and protection of Tin above justice? Did Cable deserve to die? Is taking the law into our own hands ever justified? Consider women who kill their abusive husbands.
- On page 219 there is an image of Tin as an angel: 'He seemed to hover above the earth somehow,

the curious glow of his flesh illuminating him. I would not have been surprised if wings had opened up behind him and he'd shown that he could fly.' Does this invite you to see him as exonerated, to be assessed differently to the rest of humanity?

- On page 220 the family are described as having 'the lamp pouring its yellow light onto our heads.' Does this suggest a halo? An anointing?
- p221 Harper describes a 'black bird of ingratitude' which 'cried that it was cheated, that this was a coward's way of concluding the story.' Whose story? This story? Their story? Any story? What do you think she means?
- Is Da's dreaming finally justified in the actualising of the ultimate dream of finding gold?

## Characters

The certainty of destiny is set against ambiguity of character or the changing nature of people.

While the events in the book may be highly structured and inevitable, the characters are ambiguous and equivocal. Consider this statement in the light of the following:

**Tin Flute (tin whistle?)** is four at the opening of the book, and is 'a dark child'. (p6) Tin watches the baby Caffy but does not speak. Why is Tin mute? How might the story have been different if he spoke? The closest he comes to speaking is his smile near the end of the book. Write what words you think that smile is saying.

On page 33 Harper describes hearing Tin and 'the restful searching sound of Tin's ploughing hands ... Underground amongst it, you could see how he worked in a halo of light.' There are other descriptions of his whitening skin and the brightness of his eyes that suggest an otherworldliness. Is Tin an angel? Forever innocent? The perpetual child? How does this image sit with the other constant likeness to his becoming more animal like, a 'wild child'?

**Harper Flute** is a careful observer and analyser. Sometimes her childish self-centred reactions disrupt our sense of her. Not surprisingly she is to be a writer. Her role is not just to narrate but to alert us to the way that symbolism operates in the book. Discuss.

### Audrey

On page 14 Harper says Audrey has 'a haughty streak of righteousness in her, she was as bad as someone religious'. Do events confirm this view of Audrey?

**Devon** is sensitive and self-sacrificing to the end: he is serving his country in the Second World War. He is different from the males at the centre of the action in the story but is he also ineffectual?

**Da** has trouble accepting reality. On page 19 he describes the futility of arguing with your fate which would only break your heart for you. However, on page 20 he thinks he has argued with Fate for Tin but Harper sees it as false. Da can't bear the self-sacrifice that Devon exhibits, the loss of his dream. He is determined he will have his horse. On page 160 Devon says of Da, 'He's always been mean – before the shanty, and after it. He's always been a coward.' Do you agree? Is there evidence to support that?

### Caffy

On page 20 Harper sees Caffy as afraid of the dark – foreshadowing the nature of his death. What is the purpose of Caffy's life and death within the novel? Does he become more than the 'nothing' he was at the beginning?

**Vandery Cable** first visits on page 42 and Harper comments that he was the richest man and that him calling on them was seen as a 'most honouring thing'. He sees children as commodities. 'It's lucky you've got these spares, Flute, because that one's not much use to you. He certainly isn't earning his keep'. Could you argue that he is a realist and deserving of respect? After all, he takes a sensible long-term view on page 44 when he tells Court to become a farmer or he won't be provider.

When Da gets the cattle Cable makes it clear that Da has been taken in by the stock agent. Are the two men counterpoints to each other? Linked by their opposite natures and lives?

Why don't we trust him even though he repeatedly helps the family? Do you agree that Vandery Cable was responsible for the loss of Da's cows and chickens or is it gossip? (pp161-162) Does he simply symbolise outside influence on the family? Consider in the light of Bow Fox in *Sleeping Dogs*.

Devon says of Vandery Cable, 'Why does he always want to help? What does he get out of it? He's not a charity, he'll want his pound of flesh one day.' How would you answer Devon's question?

**Ma** exhibits courage and fortitude in the face of all the disasters and yet she is not as important to the children as is Da. Do you agree? On page 183 we see Harper's shift between child and adolescent again – feeling useless and alone and then wanting not to worry about that and be a child on her mother's lap again.

## Ending

Tin embraces the opening and closure of the narrative like parenthesis; the book is named for him. How far did he travel and what is his significance? He appears to have traversed childhood and adulthood (he looks like an old man) and even mortality itself (the imagery that suggests an angel). How might Tin and his tunnelling operate symbolically?

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