

Magabala Books • Teacher Notes

Brontide

Written by Sue McPherson

Teacher Notes prepared by Christina Wheeler

OVERVIEW

Rob; (and his brother Pen) white Aussies. Rob is completing Year 12, going to schoolies, working as an apprentice in his dad's company and loves his dog, Nig. Rob believes real men take risks.

Pen; fifteen-years-old, storyteller, graffiti artiste extraordinaire with a penchant for male anatomy. Pen is liked by everyone. Pen and Benny Boy are mates.

Benny Boy; fifteen-years-old, Aboriginal, loves drawing, fishing and living with his awesome (white) foster Nan. Benny Boy doesn't trust Rob.

Jack; white, male, finishing Year 12, new to the area, from the bush and adopted into an Aboriginal family. Jack has met Pen and reckons he's a funny bugger. He has also just signed up as an apprentice working alongside Rob-the-knob.

Brontide is a coming of age story about four boys and their lot in life. Recounted through storytelling sessions at their school over a period of five days, these boys chronicle their lives. They are at times demanding, occasionally rude, always funny and unexpectedly profound. The boys like to challenge themselves and the rules, and soon realise that not everything goes to plan...

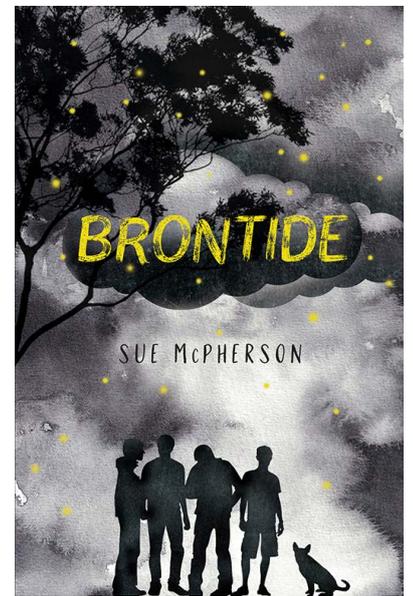
- Award-winning author and screenwriter – will garner national attention
- Author of *Grace Beside Me*, which premiered as a 13-part children's TV series on NITV in 2018
- Extraordinary read

THEMES

- Prejudice
- Relationships
- Individuality
- Courage
- Respect
- Wisdom
- Identity
- Storytelling
- Aboriginal Peoples - Social Life and Customs

AUDIENCE AND WRITING STYLE

Set on the coast of south-east Queensland, *Brontide* is a cleverly crafted coming-of-age text in which four school boys share their stories with a visiting author. Told through a series of recorded interviews, their stories intertwine with sad and tragic twists, as each boy grapples with issues of identity, prejudice and acceptance. Sue McPherson has used conventions of free verse to tell this story, effortlessly combining symbolism to tie a seemingly simple text together, although it is anything but simple in its message. *Brontide* is a truly absorbing text that is best read without knowing too much about it; the author's ability to engage readers and catch them off-guard is breathtaking. Due to the subject matter and language used, it is best suited to a secondary student audience.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue McPherson is an award-winning storyteller who lives on the Sunshine Coast. She is of Wiradjuri, Torres Strait Islander and Irish heritage, and grew up with her adopted family near Batlow in southern New South Wales. Inspired to write by her two teenage sons, in 2011 Sue won the inaugural black&write! Indigenous Writing Fellowship from the State Library of Queensland for her manuscript, *Grace Beside Me*, which was published by Magabala Books in 2012. A regular writer for TV and film, in 2015, Sue's 12-minute short drama, *Nan and a Whole Lot of Trouble* premiered on ABC TV. In 2017, *Grace Beside Me* was commissioned by NITV to be its first ever scripted live-action series, which debuted on Australian screens in early 2018.

LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

These notes have been written in context with the Australian Curriculum. The appendix highlights relevant cross-curriculum priorities and content descriptors across a range of year levels that the following activities address.

CLASSROOM IDEAS

- The Author's Note at the start of the text sets the tone and context for *Brontide*. After reading the text in its entirety, reread the Author's Note. Discuss Sue McPherson's arresting voice and her ability to connect instantly with readers. How has she used foreshadowing to engage readers?
- As you meet them, create character profiles of each of the interviewees, using evidence from the text to support your ideas.
- What is your opinion of Rob's character? In what ways do you feel sorry for him? What do you find frustrating about him? What attitudes has he inherited from Dave? What of Dave's ways does he reject? What advice would you give Rob?
- What do you think of the way in which Rob treats girls? How does Dave reflect the same insolence?
- Why does Rob refer to his parents by their Christian names? What does this reveal about his home life?
- As you read, take note of the formatting of the text. Discuss the free verse nature of the writing, including the line spacing, punctuation and varying size of the font. Why has it been formatted in this way?
- Why does Rob describe the feeling of *tarpin'* like 'Christmas when you were six... Not when Dave's home Christmas' (p17)?
- Why does Dave buy Rob a ute? What does this tell us about Dave?
- With reference to the extract from p40 below, discuss Rob's dog Nig, and the discussion that he and Sue have about its name. Hold a class discussion about the concept of 'reclaiming' and whether or not the same stigma applies to terms such as 'blackfella' and 'whitefella':

Rob: So it's about how it's said...
 Or how someone used it in the past

Sue: Yep.
 Any word can be delivered with either vinegar or sugar.

~

Sue: The word has a history and its history isn't sweet.

- In what ways is Dave power likened to that of God's? How is Dave connected to the concept of brontide (p35)?
- What is Rob's definition of a loser (p37)? Why does he think Legless is a loser? How do you feel about this when you meet Benny Boy?
- With reference to Nig's name, discuss the point the author is making when Rob says 'I can't change it now' (p39). What is it that really can't be changed?
- Discuss both the inferred and implied meanings of the 'trip' associated with *tarpin'*. How does 'tarpin' provide an important plot point for this story?
- What are your first impressions of Benny Boy? Why as a 15 year old might he be in Year 5?
- Benny's Nan describes their dog, Ramsi, as having a 'crooked bark' (43). What does she mean by this? In what ways is Benny Boy like Ramsi?



- Nan is able to sense when the brontide is approaching. Why is this an important detail in the text?
- In the role of Benny Boy, draw his story as Sue suggests when she interviews him (p46).
- How does Sue share the theme of love to readers through her interactions with Benny Boy?
- How did you feel when you discovered that Benny Boy is Legless, particularly after learning of his epilepsy?
- Why does Benny go to the park every day?
- When Sue meets Jack, she is upset to discover his mother gave him away as a baby. What do we learn about Jack when he checks: 'You right, Sue?' (p63)?
- Why, when Jack asks if 'lovingest' is a word, does Sue say 'it is now' (p65)?
- Jack comments on Sue's "All lives Matter" t-shirt. Research the "Black Lives Matter" movement, as well as the "All Live Matter" counter-movement. Why has this been included in the text?
- Why do Jack and his mum paint over Pen's graffiti? How is his Gran involved in this act?
- When discussing the term 'coconut', Sue says 'I know me now... saying someone is a coconut is hypocritical' (p67). In a paragraph, explain the importance of her comments.
- What is the difference between the elderly and elders? Discuss the role elders play in indigenous culture (see p67-68).
- Discuss Jack's point about hope being lost, and the dangers of the 'drowning in poor-bugger-me' mentality. Write a reflection of a time you felt like Jack, especially when he describes hope doing 'a runner... You just sit in your own grey and darkness and wait for it to walk right back through the door' (p70). How did you navigate your way through this situation?
- Why do Jack's mum and grandmother visit the cemetery every week? How do their actions feed into the "All Live Matter" sentiment expressed in *Brontide*?
- How did you feel when you realised Benny's sister was Mell, the same girl Jack likes to visit in the cemetery?
- Discuss the symbolism of the whirly windmills placed at Mell's grave.
- How did you react when you learnt that Jack is an apprentice of Dave's? Why?
- Why does Jack talk about prejudice experienced by bogans? How does this tie in with the theme of acceptance?
- Why do you think Rob talks himself up so much?
- Why does the newspaper article include road toll statistics? Why are there two more deaths in this year's statistics? How does this relate back to the "All Lives Matter" concept?
- Take time to discuss the feeds on the Memorial Page for Pen. How do the comments from several unknown characters help articulate and synthesise so many prejudiced attitudes prevalent in society? How are these ideas challenged through the feeds? Which feeds do you respect the most? Which are most antagonising? Why? How important is it that some of the comments have been deleted? What is your opinion of this narrative technique?
- Reread the Memorial Page once you realise Pen wrote it himself. What is Pen's purpose for writing these comments? What is he trying to say, and to whom?
- Write your own Memorial Page. Who would write on your page, and what would they say about you?
- Share how you felt when you finally met Pen, realising that he was alive.
- Pen thanks Mrs Mac for introducing him to the poetry of Maya Angelou. Find out more about Maya and her poetry at the following links:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/maya-angelou>
<https://www.poemhunter.com/maya-angelou/poems/>
- How does Pen's interview with Sue show a different side to Rob? Why is this section entitled 'Revelation'?
- Explain the relationship that Pen has with characters such as Jack and Benny Boy.
- Respond to Sue's question to Pen: 'Is there a difference between being fearless and being reckless' (p100)?
- How did you respond when reading the email from the school on p101? Discuss how the ending of *Brontide* is "expected yet unexpected".



- Once you have finished reading the text, write a reflection that shares your reading experience. How did you feel as the text twisted and turned? How did the author surprise you? How likely are you to re-read the text, and how different might that second reading be knowing what you now know?
- It is rare that an author uses themselves as a character in their own texts. Discuss this technique and why it is such a powerful tool in this story.
- Sue McPherson addresses many prejudices that exist in Australian society. As you read *Brontide*, track such issues and the various perspectives about these bigotries as experienced by different characters.
- Define what a brontide is. Why is this the title of the text?
- How has Sue McPherson used the motif of Old Man tree to frame *Brontide*? Include the symbolism of the fireflies in your discussion. How does the book's cover help convey these ideas?
- The story deliberately blends white and black people into families. Benny is Aboriginal but has been brought up by white people. Similarly, Jack is a white boy adopted by an aboriginal family. Rob's family, meanwhile, is white and he and his father refer to black people in a derogatory way. Discuss the author's choice to structure the families in this way.
- Create a story map that tracks the narrative structure of *Brontide*. Note that the Author's Note alludes to the book's conclusion, creating a circular structure. Discuss the effectiveness of this choice.
- Why has Sue McPherson included other derogatory references such as 'mussi', 'coconut' and 'sand nigger' into the text? What comment is she making about the widespread nature of prejudice?
- In what ways does *Brontide* draw attention to the pressure placed on teenagers to follow their parents' expectations, even if they disagree with them?
- Choose a section of *Brontide* to rewrite in prose.
- Why does it take so long for readers to actually meet Pen? What is your opinion of his piece of writing? Why?
- *Brontide* is told through a series of interviews, as well as other text types such as a newspaper article, social media feeds and email. Discuss the author's choice to tell this narrative through these unconventional means. How do these options create interest and propel readers through the text?
- In groups of five, create your own version of *Brontide*, assuming the roles of a visiting author and the interviewees. Decide upon two or three themes that your group narrative could address, and ways in which various characters navigate their way through such issues. Devise questions that the author could ask each person, before recording and creating your own text.
- Write the newspaper article in full that appears in Pen's writing sample.
- *Brontide* incorporates aspects of indigenous culture such as the importance of country, the role of family and respect for the deceased. As you read, keep note of the many ways in which the author includes these cultural connections.
- In what ways is *Brontide* a story about courage?
- What evidence is there throughout the text of the impact that prejudice has on society?
- Why is the book separated into several sections? How does this impact on the narrative?
- Choose one of the minor characters from *Brontide* and write a chapter of prose from their perspective.
- In what ways is *Brontide* a text about reconciliation?
- Compare *Brontide* with either the novel or movie version of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*.



APPENDIX - LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

Year	Curriculum Area
7	<p>English</p> <p>Literature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and explore ideas and viewpoints about events, issues and characters represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1619) Discuss aspects of texts, for example their aesthetic and social value, using relevant and appropriate metalanguage (ACELT1803) Recognise and analyse the ways that characterisation, events and settings are combined in narratives, and discuss the purposes and appeal of different approaches (ACELT1622)
8	<p>English</p> <p>Literature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore the ways that ideas and viewpoints in literary texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts may reflect or challenge the values of individuals and groups (ACELT1626) Explore the interconnectedness of Country/Place, People, Identity and Culture in texts including those by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors (ACELT1806) Recognise and explain differing viewpoints about the world, cultures, individual people and concerns represented in texts (ACELT1807)
9	<p>English</p> <p>Literature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interpret and compare how representations of people and culture in literary texts are drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1633) Reflect on, discuss and explore notions of literary value and how and why such notions vary according to context (ACELT1634) Analyse texts from familiar and unfamiliar contexts, and discuss and evaluate their content and the appeal of an individual author's literary style (ACELT1636)
10	<p>English</p> <p>Literature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1639) Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts (ACELT1812) Compare and evaluate how 'voice' as a literary device can be used in a range of different types of texts such as poetry to evoke particular emotional responses (ACELT1643)
<p>Cross-Curriculum Priorities</p> <p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and culture</p>	