

RUNT

By Craig Silvey, illustrated by Sara Acton

RECOMMENDED FOR: 8–12 years old, Years 3–7, UPPER PRIMARY to LOWER SECONDARY

THEMES: Family, friendship, pets, community, the Outback, drought, sustainability, morality, heroes and villains, responsibility, kindness and care, and creativity.

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CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS (All curriculum references in this document relate to the Australian Curriculum, Version 9.0)

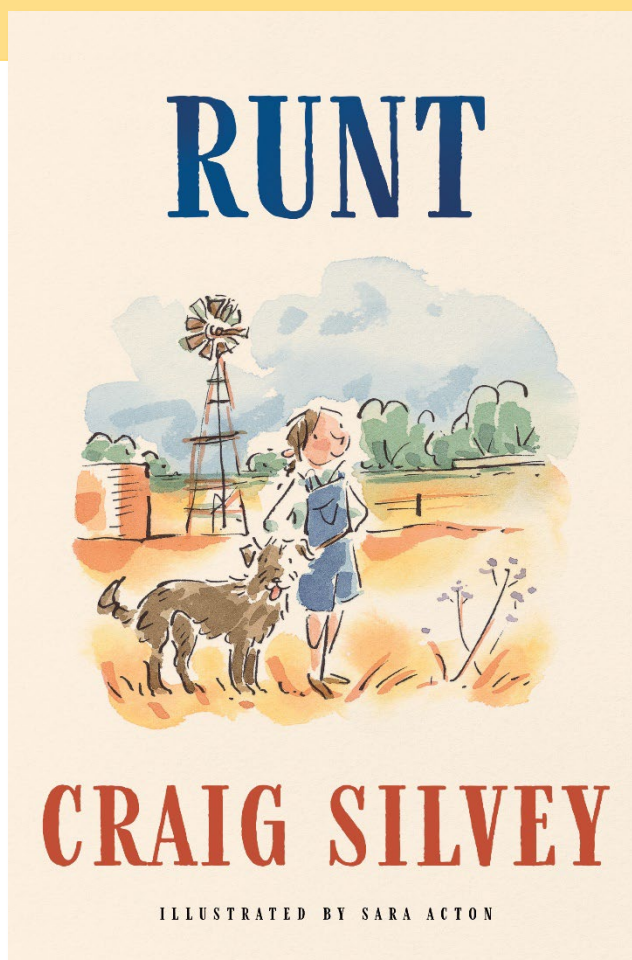
- **ENGLISH: Language, literacy and literature**
- **Humanities and Social Science (HASS): Geography**
- **Health and Physical Education**
- **The Arts: Visual Arts and Drama**

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CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT

Runt is a heart-warming and hilarious tale of kindness, friendship, hurdles, hoops, tunnels, see-saws, and, above all, being yourself and bringing out the best in others.

This engaging, beautifully written, fast-paced and witty story will appeal to both younger and older readers studying English. Strong characterisation draws you into each character's personal journey, and a clever and unpredictable plot is revealed as the story unfolds, providing multiple points for readers to reflect on events, then predict what might happen next.

The book provides great opportunities for close reading as a class text; clever use of language provides opportunities to study language at word, sentence and text levels, and, as a rich text, it can be revisited again and again.

Themes related to community and drought support the use of the text as part of a unit connected to HASS (Geography), focusing on the interaction of people and their environments. There is also a strong personal growth theme within the text, leading to connections with some aspects of Health & Physical Education, as well as the physical aspects of an agility course. The strong description within the writing could also lead to complementary studies in Visual Arts and Drama.

STORY SUMMARY

Annie lives in the dying town of Upson Downs, where a drought has been exacerbated by the greedy actions of the local landlord, who has dammed the local water source to feed his farm and starve others of water so he can eventually acquire all the land in the town. Annie and her family are in debt, and close to having to leave the farm they have lived on for generations.

Annie is an unconventional 11-year-old girl who likes to 'fix' things. Her best friend is a dog called Runt. After years of evading capture as a street-dog, he is fast and agile, however he only ever responds to Annie's commands.

Annie and her family visit the local agricultural show where Annie stumbles across a dog agility competition. The prize money persuades her to enter Runt, who competes once all the spectators have left the ring and wins the prize, much to the disgust of the local villain Fergus Fink, who believes he deserved to come first in the competition. Annie's success qualifies her to enter the Australian National Titles.

Annie begins to train Runt in earnest, but she is unable to solve the problem of his 'stage fright'; his inability to preform when anyone other than Annie is watching him. After meeting a wise ex-competitor (Bernadette) Annie invents 'blinkers' for Runt which enable him to compete in the Nationals and win. This now qualifies her to enter the international dog show Krumpets, which takes place in London. The whole town gets behind Annie, raising enough money for her to fly to the UK with her father Bryan.

Fergus Fink, who also qualified for Krumpets, puts in place a series of dastardly acts designed to eliminate the competition and ensure he wins. His victory is however a hollow one, as Annie's act of compassion and bravery, running the course holding Runt, captures the world's imagination, along with her brother Max's video of her story, which goes viral on YouTube. The drought breaks and Annie's family, and the town, forge a new path into the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Craig Silvey is an author and screenwriter from Fremantle, Western Australia. His critically acclaimed debut novel, *Rhubarb*, was published in 2004. His bestselling novel, *Jasper Jones*, was released in 2009 and is considered a modern Australian classic. Published in over a dozen territories, *Jasper Jones* has won plaudits in three continents, including an International Dublin Literary Award shortlisting, a Michael J. Printz Award Honor, and a Miles Franklin Literary Award shortlisting. *Jasper Jones* was the Australian Book Industry Awards Book of the Year for 2010. Craig's third novel *Honeybee* was published in 2019 and won Best Fiction for the Indie Book Awards 2021 and Dymock's Book of the Year 2020.

Q&A WITH CRAIG SILVEY

What attracted you to writing a middle-grade novel?

The truth is, I suppose, I didn't set out to write a middle-grade novel.

If a novelist listens carefully, their story will tell them how it needs to be written and who might want to read it.

So when Annie Shearer and Runt entered my thoughts, and once I'd spent some time with them, it became clear that their tale was best suited to younger readers, especially those who might see a bit of themselves in Annie. With that said, I think *Runt* is a story for everyone. I hope it's a book that gets passed around and shared with the whole family.

Do you think stories about the importance of kindness, friendship, family and being yourself are particularly needed today?

I wrote *Runt* in the middle of the pandemic, during a period where many of us were a bit scared and uncertain. For our own safety, and to protect the most vulnerable among us, we were all required to cooperate and make sacrifices. It was difficult and challenging and often heartbreaking, but that collective effort made us less afraid, and it brought us closer together.

On a smaller, localised level, extending our love and compassion and care to our family and friends has the same effect. It strengthens our bonds and it comforts us too, knowing that we're supported and cared for.

It's why I love the Shearers so much. Each member of the family thinks beyond themselves and offers their own unique skills in order to pitch in and help out. Regardless of your age, I think that's an inspiring example of how to be a good person.

What do you hope young readers will take away from reading the story?

As with any of my stories, I hope readers will be moved and that my words will be meaningful. But any

specific emotions they might feel or any lessons they might take away are up to them to determine – because books are very personal. They happen inside us. As readers we build stories within the private universe of our minds, using our own experiences and thoughts and imaginations to bring them to life. Any revelations or conclusions that emerge are earned by taking that journey, and they're special, because they're ours alone.

Did any books or films influence you when writing *Runt*?

I tend to avoid reading other books while I'm writing, because I'm very protective of the voice of my novel. I do watch a lot of films though, and while I was writing *Runt*, I found *Paddington*, *Amelie*, *Babe*, *Isle Of Dogs*, *Best In Show* and *The Castle* to be wonderful companions.

Did you have a 'favourite' novel or series of novels when growing up?

I was a voracious and obsessive reader when I was young, and I had quite diverse tastes. I adored James Herriott's *All Creatures Great And Small* series. I devoured all of Roald Dahl's books, with a particular affection for *Matilda*.

I loved Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books, *Point Horror* novels, and I loved poring over *The Guinness Book Of World Records*.

Paul Jennings was a favourite. He wrote a story called *The Busker* which was the first piece of writing to make me cry – and it still does. Likewise, a book called *Goodnight Mister Tom* by Michelle Magorian introduced me to a deep complexity of emotions that I'd never felt before.

More than anything, I favoured books that made me laugh. I loved *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole* by Sue Townsend. I loved anything by Douglas Adams. And I was hopelessly addicted to *MAD Magazine*, *Footrot Flats*, and, of course, *Calvin and Hobbes*, which I still love to this day.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

BEFORE READING

- To provide some context for students whose cultural context may not involve agricultural shows or dog shows, view the [Australian Screen website](#) that provides interesting background information on the popularity of Australian agricultural shows on film.
- It is likely that the Krumpets International Dog Show is based on the real-life Crufts Dog Show, that takes place annually in the UK. Students might like to explore the [Crufts website](#) and discuss some of the different categories and events held. Next, watch the [Crufts 2022 dog agility final video](#) to see what Annie and Runt would have to do to win the final. For a contrast, watch the [Dogtime website page and videos](#) about dogs who didn't care about agility courses!
- Explore the meaning of the word 'runt'. What does it mean to be a runt? Does this term apply just to animals, or can it apply to humans? Why might the author have chosen to use this word for the title of the story? What does it make you predict the story may be about?
- The town of Upson Downs, where the story is set, is going through a man-made drought exacerbated by local water politics where one local is taking more water than he should. The Murray-Darling Basin Plan would provide an excellent real-life context for this story. Watch the [ABC BTN news story](#) (note this is from 2017) that explains some of the controversies behind the plan and discuss some of the moral, social and economic issues behind water allocations.
- Read the story *Drought* by Jackie French and discuss what it might feel like to live in drought. What might you have to give up? What might be the most stressful or challenging aspects of living in a drought?



Appreciating literature and contexts

Discuss different responses readers have to characters and events represented in literary texts drawn from a range of historical, social and cultural contexts and created by First Nations Australian and non-First Nations Australian authors, and authors from around the world.

Understand how vocabulary is used to express greater precision of meaning, including through the use of specialist and technical terms, and explore the history of words.

Knowledge and understanding

Physical and environmental geography, the quantity and variability of Australia's water resources, compared with other continents.

Human geography. Causes of urbanisation and its impact on the quality of the urban environment, aesthetic, and cultural value of place to people

Language for expressing and developing ideas

Understand how vocabulary is used to express greater precision of meaning, including through the use of specialist and technical terms, and explore the history of words.

ENGLISH

LITERATURE

Responding to literature (Years 5–7)

- The story is titled *Runt*. Could there be an argument that the story is named not just after the dog, but after Annie too? In what ways might Annie herself be a 'runt'?
- In what ways did both Annie and Runt prove that they were not 'runts'?
- 'Heroes and villains' is a common theme in literature. Identify the heroes in this story, including any 'unlikely' heroes, then discuss the villains. What function did the villains in this story play and why are they important? How did their acts of villainy help to move the plot forward?
- Elements of the writing style, characterisation and plot in *Runt* echo those of some stories from Roald Dahl.

Responding to literature

Y5: Present an opinion on a literary text using specific terms about literary devices, text structures and language features, and reflect on the viewpoints of others.

Y6: identify similarities and differences in literary texts on similar topics, themes or plots.

Y7: form an opinion about characters, settings and events in texts, identifying areas of agreement and difference with others' opinions and justifying a response.

- List familiar Roald Dahl stories as a class and identify key elements of his writing (such as use of humour, strong characterisation, strong fantasy themes).
- Complete a Venn diagram to compare these with *Runt*. How and why might you argue that this book might be written by the ‘Roald Dahl of the 21st century’?
- ‘Happy endings should always be predictable’. Discuss this statement with reference to the ending in *Runt*. Although the ending was happy, was it predictable? Why, or why not?

Y7: Compare the ways that language and images in different types of texts are used to create character, and to influence emotions and opinions.

Discuss aspects of literary texts that contribute to their aesthetic and social value.

ASSESSMENT

Book review: Write a book review for *Runt*. Include a summary of the plot, a brief description of the main characters, a personal comment about the story and a rating out of 5.

Examining literature (Years 5–7)

- Throughout the story, the author compares key characters to animals: Max is compared to a honey badger; Susie to a bird of paradise; Bryan to a panda; Bernadette to a pangolin; Fergus to a peacock; and, finally, Annie to Bernadette’s new dog.
 - Discuss how these similes are used to add information about each character in order to help the audience better imagine and understand them.
- Pages 12-16 introduce Earl Robert-Barren. Re-read these pages, paying close attention to the descriptive language used to build an image of Earl’s house, farm and ‘collecting’ interests.
 - Support students to recognise that the author builds a beautiful description, then uses his author voice to add asides that disconnect Earl from the beauty of his world. Discuss how the author’s point of view helps to characterise Earl as a villain.
- The character of Dolly, Annie’s grandmother, is described on pp. 61-62. The author describes her through her actions, rather than by using his ‘voice’. Compare and contrast this style of characterisation with the way he characterises Earl Robert-Barren.
- On page 80, Bryan’s secret hobby is hinted at when he surreptitiously observes the judges viewing his rose. What does this scene reveal about Bryan? How does this contrast with the character we have met so far?
- The chapter ‘Dolly the Dodger’ (which starts on p. 178) reveals a lot about the character of Dolly, and also compares her to Annie. Discuss how the two characters are similar and different, then record these ideas in a Venn diagram. How does Dolly’s story help to set up the plot for Annie’s story?
- Read the chapter ‘Trial’ that starts on p. 160. Identify examples of how the author has used the extended metaphor of a courtroom to build mood and add tension. Find quotes that illustrate the setting descriptions, actions and the characters’ language.
- On page 174, we learn that Annie is invited to the international Krumpets Dog Show but cannot afford to attend, then, on p. 176 we learn of her reaction when she takes down the practice course and then attacks the scarecrow. What did the author’s inclusion of these two actions help us understand about Annie’s character? What did the destruction of both the course and the scarecrow reveal about where we are up to in the plot?

Examining Literature

Y5: recognise that the point of view in a literary text influence how readers interpret and respond to events and characters.

Examine the effects of imagery, including simile, metaphor and personification, and sound devices in narratives, poetry and songs.

Y6: identify and explain characteristics that define an author’s individual style.

Explain the way authors use sound and imagery to create meaning and effect in poetry.

Y7: identify and explain the ways that characters, settings and events combine to create meaning in narratives.

Identify and explain how literary devices create layers of meaning in texts including poetry.

Creating Literature

- Many of the characters are compared to animals to build characterisation (see Examining Literature). Re-read p. 27, where Max is compared to a honey badger.
 - Choose a character that has not been compared to an animal (e.g. Dolly or Simpkins). Brainstorm suggestions for animals that might match the personality of one of these characters, choose one animal, then write a paragraph comparing them to this animal to reveal more about their character.
- On page 30 we are introduced to Runt's backstory. Read the picture book *Mutt Dog* by Stephen Michael King then prompt students to use a story board to turn Runt's story into a picture book for younger children.
- On page 114 we learn that Fergus hates dogs, then on p. 131 we learn that the secret to success at a dog agility show is 'the bond'. While it is clear that Fergus does not have a bond with Chariot, Simpkins does.
 - Brainstorm ideas for an alternative ending where the bond between Simpkins and Chariot leads them on to future success, rather than retirement. How was Fergus subverted? In which existing scene might this happen, or would you write a new scene?
- On page 275, the chapter starts with a short yet very funny commentary on what is happening on the arena floor after Fergus Fink has sprayed the equipment.
 - Challenge students to bring the scene to life and create their own extended commentary of the disaster, by first writing a short script then by performing the commentary aloud.
- We never find out what happens to Earl Robert-Barren. The suggestion is that he drowned, however we do not know this for sure. Imagine that he survived the storm and the flood. What did he do next?
 - Write an epilogue about his next adventure. Did he suffer from memory loss? Did he have an epiphany and change his ways? Did he continue to be the same person and move to another town and repeat his mistakes?
- Ballads are a traditional form of poetry that use a clear structure to tell a story.
 - Read some Australian ballads (Banjo Patterson is a good place to start), discussing how ballads tell a story in an accessible way.
 - Jointly identify 6-8 key moments in the story of *Runt*, then attempt to turn each moment in the story into a 4-line stanza.
- Fergus Fink is very clearly identified as the villain in the story. Discuss how the interpretation of any story ultimately comes down to perspective, which is often guided by the narrator and other characters.
 - What if Fergus wasn't a villain, just sad and misunderstood? If you were Fergus Fink, how might the story have unfolded from your point of view? What happened that was unfair? Why did you take the actions you did?
 - Write one to two paragraphs from Fergus' point of view, justifying his actions.

Creating Literature

Y5: Create and edit literary texts, experimenting with figurative language, storylines, characters and settings from texts students have experienced.

Y6: Create and edit literary texts that adapt plot structure, characters, settings and/or ideas from texts students have experienced, and experiment with literary devices.

Y7: create and edit literary texts that experiment with language features and literary devices encountered in texts.

LITERACY

Comprehension (Years 5–7)

Use the following comprehension questions to help students understand key points in the text:

1. Pages 10-11 introduce us to Runt. What do we learn about Runt and his relationship with Annie in these pages? Why is this important in the story?
2. Page 23 describes Annie and Runt herding sheep. How does this scene set up the plot that unfolds later in the book? Do you think this scene is important? Why, or why not?
3. We first meet Susie and her humble pie on p. 43. Read aloud the narrator's description of her humble pie and provide students a chance to react! Check and see if students know the idiomatic meaning of 'eating humble pie', i.e. to make a humble apology and accept humiliation. How might 'eating humble pie' be a symbol of the Shearers' life?
4. On page 54 Bryan refers to 'kind' lies. What might these be? How are they different from 'normal' lies? When might it be acceptable to tell a kind lie? Find further examples of kind lies in the story.
5. On page 112, the narrator explains some of the different interpretations of the word pedigree. Look up the definition of the word, then discuss how it has been used in this chapter. How could the concept of a pedigree be misinterpreted and used as a basis for discrimination, either for those who have a pedigree, or for those who don't?
6. At the end of the chapter on p. 152 Fergus Fink says '*I've got her*'. What does he mean by this? How does this short speech work to signal a further complication in the plot?
7. On page 167 we find out that Annie didn't tell her family about the prize money. Why might she have hidden this fact? What does it reveal about her character and her desire to fix things?
8. The chapter that starts on p. 183 is titled 'The Cherished Rascal'. Explore what the words in this phrase mean, then discuss why the chapter might have been given this title. How does this phrase help us to understand the shift in the town's attitude towards Runt?
9. On page 192 Annie feels '*empty and full . . . Happy and sad*' after reading Wally's diary entry. Explain that these are examples of juxtaposition, where two things are placed together for a contrasting effect. Provide reasons as to why the character of Annie might experience these contrasting emotions after reading Wally's last diary entry.
10. 'The Impossible Choice' is the title of the chapter that starts on p. 211. What are Annie and Bryan's choices? Why are they 'impossible'? What conclusion do both Annie and Bryan independently come to at the end of the chapter? How do these choices then set up what will happen next in the plot?
11. On page 216 Susie explains aeroplane etiquette to Annie and Bryan. What does this reveal about the characters and their experiences? Discuss the meaning of 'context' in relation to literature (the context of a text is the environment or situation in which a text is responded to or created). What does this context (never being on



Interpreting, analysing and evaluating

Y5: Explain characteristic features used in imaginative, informative and persuasive texts to meet the purpose of the text.

Navigate and read texts for specific purposes, monitoring meaning using strategies such as skimming, scanning and confirming.

Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring and questioning to build literal and inferred meaning to evaluate information and ideas.

Y6: analyse how text structures and language features work together to meet the purpose of a text, and engage and influence audiences.

Select, navigate and read texts for a range of purposes, monitoring meaning and evaluating the use of structural features; for example, table of contents, glossary, chapters, headings and subheadings.

Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring and questioning to build literal and inferred meaning, and to connect and compare content from a variety of sources.

a plane before) reveal about the Shearers' lives? Is this similar or different to students' own contexts? Discuss.

12. What is the 'kind lie' that Bryan tells Susie on p. 225? What does this reveal about his character and his relationship with his wife?
13. From page 254 onwards, Annie and Bryan meet a man who is dragging the canal looking for treasure. What happens in this scene? What do we learn? Why might the author have included this scene in the story?
14. One of the deeper themes in the book is the concept of feeling happy and satisfied with your life. On p. 264 we learn that Earl will never be satisfied, however much he achieves. How do other characters in the book end up satisfied? Is their satisfaction linked to their emotions or their 'success' or both? Why does this theme function as a moral in the story? What is the moral?
15. On page 280 we read a description of Fergus' outfit. This is an example of great descriptive writing. Task students to draw a picture of Fergus in this outfit and discuss how imagery can be used to paint pictures with your words. Can they create an outfit for another character only using written description?
16. The plot climax occurs from the chapter 'The Big Moment', p. 289, onwards. In this chapter, Annie is clearly going to lose the Krumpets competition because Runt won't run, so she takes the unconventional route and carries Runt around the course, then bursts into tears for the first time. At the exact same moment in Australia, on p. 297, Annie's tears mirror the start of rain in Upson Downs. Discuss why these two moments form the climax of the plot (perhaps draw a plot graph showing key moments in the story), then discuss what happens to the plot after this point.
17. Summarise the events in the chapter 'The Emerald City', which begins on p. 312. What do the characters of Annie and Bryan learn about themselves and each other? In terms of the plot, why could it be argued that this point is the beginning of the resolution to the story? How does it also add to the overall coda, or message, in the story?
18. Annie takes off her tool belt on p. 325 for the final time. Discuss what the tool belt symbolises in the story. Why does Annie feel she does not need it anymore? How has her character changed from the beginning of the story until now?

Y7: analyse the ways in which language features shape meaning and vary according to audience and purpose.

Explain the structure of ideas such as the use of taxonomies, cause and effect, extended metaphors and chronology.

Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring, questioning and inferring to analyse information and ideas.

Creating texts

- Annie is learning about the water cycle on p. 3. Research this then create an informative text (with graphics) which might be included as a classroom poster to illustrate the cycle.
- We are first introduced to 'Humble pie' on p. 41, where we learn that it can in fact have any ingredients. Read the ingredients and discuss what this pie might taste like. As a fun illustration of the concept, watch the episode titled 'Fancy Restaurant', from the children's cartoon *Bluey*, where Banjo has to eat a similar dish to humble pie (available on [ABC iView](#)). Brainstorm ideas for a humble pie (or horrible meal as per *Bluey*!) then create a recipe for it.
- Read the description of the Woolrama Showground, then find examples of real life maps from your local Agricultural Show. Use the descriptions from the text to create a map of the Woolrama Showground. What else could you add to your map that is missing from the text but is present at your local show?

Creating Texts

Y5: re-read and edit their own and others' work for precision using negotiated criteria for vocabulary, text structures and language features.

Develop a handwriting style that is legible, fluent and automatic.

Explore less common plurals, and understand how a suffix changes the meaning or grammatical form of a word.

- The log chopping event is hilariously outlined on p. 73 as a *'recipe for disaster'*. There are lots of amusing yet dangerous sports in existence around the world, including the Coopers Hill Cheese Rolling Competition, which takes place annually in the UK and has been the subject of a Netflix documentary. Challenge students to find some further examples of ridiculous sports or invent their own. They should then write a short paragraph describing how the sport is played, using humour and sarcasm in the style of the description in the book.
- Page 99 describes Bryan's hybrid fruit experiments. Create a list of common and exotic fruits, then use this to invent a new hybrid. Study examples of scientific diagrams of plants, then create a diagram of the new hybrid, labelling the parts of the plant. Next, write a paragraph underneath describing the texture, taste and smell of the new hybrid fruit.
- On pages 106-108, Annie researches phobias and their cures. Ask students to conduct their own research into unusual phobias and their cures, then write a newspaper article about one example. They can either use a real-life phobia and example cure or make one up.
- On page 114 onwards Fergus lists all the reasons he doesn't like dogs, then all the reasons why he likes cats. List his reasons for each, then brainstorm further ideas as a whole class. Use the reasons to create a persuasive text, arguing one or both sides of the statement 'Cats make better pets than dogs'.

Phonic and Word Knowledge

- The names of the dogs (and indeed the people) in the story often carry 'hidden' meanings. Explore the word 'runt' and 'chariot'. What does each dog's name reveal about their role in the overall plot? Build on this concept by exploring the words 'barren' and 'fink'. How do the meanings of these words relate to the villainous characters they are linked to?
- On page 157 the prefix 'in-' and 'ir-' is used by Fergus in the words *'incontrovertible, incontestable, irrefutable'*. Research the meaning of these words, along with the meaning of the prefix 'in-' and 'ir-'.
- Research the etymology of the word 'runt' to find out how its meaning has changed over time. Can students think of other words that have different meanings today that have evolved from their original uses? (Read the [Ideas.Ted](#) article for inspiration!).

Phonic and word knowledge

Y6: Use phonic knowledge of common and less common grapheme-phoneme relationships to read and write increasingly complex words.

Use knowledge of known words, word origins including some Latin and Greek roots, base words, prefixes, suffixes, letter patterns and spelling generalisations to spell new words including technical words.

Y7: Understand how to use spelling rules and word origins; for example, Greek and Latin roots, base words, suffixes, prefixes and spelling patterns to learn new words and how to spell them.

LANGUAGE

Text structure and organisation (Years 5–7)

- Support students to identify that the text is organised into chapters, as many narrative texts are. Study the chapter titles, and discuss how the author has used the chapter titles to both reveal the topic of the chapter but to also reveal some key themes in the story (e.g. 'Scarecrow' or 'Cherished Runt'). Find further examples of chapter titles which are linked to key themes.
- Closely examine the length and style of sentences on p. 156, which describes a tense moment when Annie and Runt perform at the second dog show.
 - How do these sentences compare to the general length of sentences throughout the book? How does the author use variations in sentence length to build tension?

Text structure and organisation

Y5: Describe how spoken, written and multimodal texts use language features and are typically organised into characteristic stages and phases, depending on purposes in texts.

Understand how texts can be made cohesive by using the starting point of a sentence or paragraph to give prominence to the message and to guide the reader through the

- The author often uses one-sentence paragraphs. Find examples and discuss why he might choose to construct a paragraph that contains only one sentence.
 - Compare and contrast examples with paragraphs that include more than one sentence, discussing the purpose of the different paragraph lengths.
- Identify some of the recurring symbols or concepts in the book which help to build overall themes (these might include the comparison of people to animals, use of oxymorons such as ‘kind lie’ or ‘cherished runt’, use of names which reveal character’s traits).

Language for expressing and developing ideas

- Task different students to choose one page in the book for close study. Each student should highlight simple, compound and complex sentences using different colours, then tally how many of each.
 - As a class, discuss how the author uses a variety of sentences to build interest.
- Study some of the chapters that are dedicated to particular characters, for example ‘Runt’ or ‘To the Max’. At sentence and word level, find examples of descriptive phrases and clauses that build description.
- Focusing on the same descriptive chapters, identify the use of different types of adjectives to build description in noun groups (e.g. adjectives that function as quantifiers, describers or classifiers).
- The chapter starting on p. 195 is titled ‘Wolf at the Door’. Explore what this idiom means, and how it relates to the action in the chapter.
- Study the illustrations throughout the story. At what points do they occur in various chapters? What is the purpose of including the illustrations in the text? How do they provide additional insight and meaning to the plot, characters or setting?

For example, on p. 15 we see an image of Earl Robert-Barren looking down at a model of Upson Downs. This illustration helps the reader to visualise the character and, by depicting the town as a model under his sneering gaze, it also helps the reader to understand the power that Earl holds over the town, making him seem even more evil and uncaring.

Y6: Explain how texts across the curriculum are typically organised into characteristic stages and phases depending on purposes, recognising how authors often adapt text structures and language features.

Understand that cohesion can be created by the intentional use of repetition, and the use of word associations.

Y7: Identify and describe how texts are structured differently depending on their purpose and how language features vary in texts.

Understand that the cohesion of texts relies on devices that signal structure and guide readers, such as overviews and initial and concluding paragraphs.

Language for expressing and developing ideas

Y5: Understand that the structure of a complex sentence includes a main clause and at least one dependent clause, and understand how writers can use this structure for effect.

Explain how the sequence of images in print, digital and film texts has an effect on meaning.

Use commas to indicate prepositional phrases, and apostrophes where there is multiple possession.

ASSESSMENT

- Select one character from the text, then select one paragraph from the text that describes this character. Annotate the paragraph to identify the language features that are used to build description, explaining their effect on the reader.
- The main character, Annie, is a child in the story, however most of the other characters are adults. Towards the end of the story, Annie takes off her tool belt, which is symbolic of a shift in her ideas and beliefs that will likely carry through to adulthood. Choose one adult character and imagine that you can go back in time to when they are a child. Write a paragraph that describes a key incident that happened to them as a child and how it contributed towards their ideas and beliefs as an adult. After writing, add an explanatory paragraph that identifies the clues from the text that were used to develop the key incident (e.g. Fink lost a competition, Earl was bullied or left out).
- Write an additional chapter to the novel set 10 years after the ending. Where are the main characters now? What has happened in the town of Upson Downs?

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

GEOGRAPHY



Knowledge and understanding (Years 5–7)

- The quality and characteristics of Upson Downs changed dramatically after Earl dammed the water supply. Identify examples from the text, then research dams that have changed local communities by reading the 2015 Guardian article [12 Dams that Changed the World](#). Use the information from the book and from the article to write a paragraph about the possible effects of dams on local communities.
- The Murray-Darling Basin water plan would provide an excellent complementary geographical case study to the events that take place in the book. Use the Murray-Darling Basin Authority website page [Basin facts for kids](#) to research some of the features of the Murray-Darling Basin. Next, view the [BTN news report](#) about the basin plan, then complete the [accompanying activities](#). Finish by discussing the impacts of political decisions about water use on the local community, both positive and negative.
- We meet the community of Upson Downs when they are in drought. Research the causes and effects of drought in Australia, then create an infographic to explain drought.

Skills

- Develop a question to investigate related to a water use issue either locally or anywhere in Australia (e.g. 'What is the effect of water restrictions on the town of...?' Or 'How has low rainfall affected the local community of...?').
- Investigate Goyder's Line and research local rainfall data to explain the existence of the line. Compare rainfall data over time, and draw conclusions about the more recent effect of climate change upon the location of the line and usability of local land for farming.
- Explore local temperature and rainfall data for your town or region. What conclusions can you draw from this data about the likelihood of experiencing drought, both in the past and in the future?

Geography

The location of a range of countries in Europe and North America in relation to Australia and the influence of people on the environmental characteristics of selected places on those continents.

The influence of people, including First Nations People of Australia, on the environmental characteristics of Australian places.

Physical and environmental geography

Classification of environmental resources and the forms that water takes as it connects and changes places and environments.

The quantity and variability of Australia's water resources, compared with other continents.

The nature and distribution of water scarcity, its impacts and strategies to improve the sustainability of places, including studies drawn from Australia and West Asia and/or North Africa.

ASSESSMENT

- Write a letter to Earl Robert-Barren from the Mayor of Upson Downs. Outline the effects that his dam has caused for the local community and provide reasons as to why he should remove the dam and re-instate the water source.
- Create two side-by-side images showing the town of Upson Downs in drought and not in drought. Label the geographical features in each image and include examples of community prosperity (when there is enough water) and poverty (when in drought).
- Research weather patterns and geographical topography of your local area. Create a diagram to explain when and why your area receives (or does not receive) much rain.

HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Personal, social and community health (Years 5–8)

- How is Annie's identity influenced by the people and places around her? What values does she hold and where have these come from?
- On a surface level, Annie is a 'runt' in the story; she does not immediately fit in with her peers and appears different and isolated. In fact, many of the characters in the story do not fit into traditional 'success' stereotypes of men and women. Before discussing stereotypes, ask students to draw a man and woman, clothed, then give them a name and job. Identify common themes in the drawings and challenge any underlying stereotypes. Connect to the story by explaining how some key characters do not fit stereotypical profiles, yet are successful and happy.
- Family relationships are a key part of Annie's support network. Identify these relationships, discussing the role each family member plays in helping Annie. Identify your own support networks and the positive effects they have on your life.
- Concepts of respect, empathy and power run throughout the relationships between characters in the book. Identify examples of respectful and disrespectful relationships, empathy and lack of empathy and appropriate and inappropriate use of power, discussing the positive and negative effects they have on the characters involved.
- Towards the end of the story, we learn about the plaque dedicated to Wally Shearer that states '*Everyone deserves to walk their own path*'. Discuss what this means both individually and in a community, then find examples of characters at the end of the book who have chosen to 'walk their own path'. How does individual diversity build a strong community? What could the town of Upson Downs do to further promote inclusivity for people?

Movement and physical activity

- *Runt* is based on a dog completing an agility course rather than a human. Flip this idea, challenging students to design their own human agility course using equipment found in the sports shed or school gym. Incorporate at least 6 different movement skills, drawing a map of their course, explaining each 'station' and the skill it tests.
- Challenge students to build their course in real life, then time each other to complete it. Measure resting heart rate before starting, then heart-rate at the end. To what extent does their course challenge competitors? How could they make it more achievable (if too challenging) or more challenging (if too easy)?
- Dog agility shows are a popular community-based activity or sport. Identify local community physical activities or sports, then identify any further activities or sports that you think should be included? What steps would you need to take to get more people involved in fun community-based sports activities?

ASSESSMENT

- Reflect on your own identity by answering the following questions: Where are you from and, as a result, what things are you interested in? Who have been key influences on you and how have they shaped you? How does your wellbeing impact on your relationships? What impact does place have on identity? Can you explain why you believe people's identities can change?
- Design a physical skills course for a younger child (e.g. Year 1). Draw a map of the course, explaining what the child will need to do at each station. Write a paragraph to explain the fundamental movement skills they need to practise and how each station is designed for a particular skill and is accessible for their age range.

THE ARTS

VISUAL ART



Developing practices and skills

- At the end of the book, we learn that the town has erected a statue to commemorate Runt. What might the statue look like? Use the description in the story to create a sketch.
- Task students to use elements of the story to draft (in colour) a mural to be displayed in the town that tells the story of Annie and Runt. How will their artwork tell the story? How will elements in the story relate to each other to tell a sequential tale? How will colour be used to add mood?
- Ask students to imagine that the publisher wants to turn the story into a short picture book for younger children. In order to apply for the job of the book's illustrator, students must choose one key scene from the book and create an illustration to accompany it. Remind them that the artwork must add extra meaning and work to complement the text rather than be a direct visual copy of it. What media will they use? How will they use colour, shade and tone to add depth and create mood?

Developing practices and skills

Experiment with, document and reflect on ways to use a range of visual conventions, visual arts processes and materials.

DRAMA

- We first 'view' Fergus Fink's performance on pp. 69-70. Re-read the text closely, then ask students to plan and prepare a mime sequence to capture the tone and mood of Fink's performance. Others may wish to perform in role as members of the audience, reacting to Fink's act.
- Annie and Bryan both face a dilemma on p. 213 in the chapter titled 'The Impossible Choice'. Use the hot seating technique, with students in role as characters, to explore what each character might be thinking and feeling. Next, set up a conscience alley to help each character listen to the arguments on both sides of their choice, then make a final decision.
- In pairs or small groups, ask students to choose one key scene from the text that involves at least two different characters, then create a series of freeze frames that represent the sequence of action. What expressions will the characters show on their faces? What positions will their bodies be in? How will the characters relate to each other? What mood do you want to convey in these images and how might it change throughout the scene?
- Adapt the same key scene chosen for the freeze frames into a scene from a play. In a small group, re-write the scene including (where appropriate) a narrator's scene setting, various characters' dialogue and any relevant stage directions. Practise and perform for an audience.

VISUAL ART ASSESSMENT

A diptych is a piece of art that comprises two corresponding images joined together. Create a diptych to represent one of the following: the two sides of life in Upson Downs during and after drought; the change that Annie goes through as a character in the story; two possible sides of one of the villains (e.g. Earl or Fergus). The artwork can either be realistic

or abstract, depending on the choice of subject. Write a paragraph to explain your choice of subject, composition, media and colour.

DRAMA ASSESSMENT

Develop and perform a short dramatic monologue to explain what one character is feeling at a particular point in the story. Practice and perform to an audience.

ABOUT THE WRITER OF THESE NOTES

Sophie Honeybourne is a primary teacher with a passion for children's literature. After studying English Literature at university in the UK, dabbling in a diverse series of jobs and engaging in some globe-trotting, she finally settled upon a career in teaching, completing a Master of Teaching at Sydney University. She held teaching and leadership positions at schools across Sydney before moving to the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, where she works as a Primary teacher.

Sophie has written numerous educational literature units for the Primary English Teaching Association of Australia, as well as producing materials for Educational Services Australia and the NSW School Magazine.

In her spare time Sophie loves to spend time with her two children and long-suffering husband, read and drink cocktails with her book club, sail, ocean swim, cook, garden and sleep.

CORRESPONDING RESOURCES

Charlotte's Web by E. B. White

Mutt Dog by Stephen Michael King

When Billy was a Dog by Kirsty Murray and Karen Blair

Red Dog (movie)

Buckley's Chance (movie)

ONLINE LINKS IN FULL (in order of appearance in the notes)

Australian Screen website: <https://aso.gov.au/titles/collections/agricultural-shows/>

Crufts website: <https://www.crufts.org.uk/>

Crufts 2022 dog agility final video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vOriXNYAzA>

Dogtime website page and videos: <https://dogtime.com/lifestyle/dog-activities/75139-hilarious-dogs-agility-course-videos>

ABC BTN news story about the Murray-Darling Basin: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_ofMttEuy8

Accompanying BTN activities: <https://www.abc.net.au/btn/resources/teacher/episode/20170801-basinplanproblems.pdf>

Bluey Episode – Fancy Restaurant:

<https://iview.abc.net.au/show/bluey/series/2/video/CH1903Q010S00>

TED Ideas – words that have changed their meaning over time: <https://ideas.ted.com/20-words-that-once-meant-something-very-different/>

Guardian article: 12 Dams That Changed the World:

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/blog/2015/jan/12/12-dams-that-changed-the-world-hoover-sardar-sarovar-three-gorges>

Drama Resource website links:

<https://dramaresource.com/freeze-frames/>

<https://dramaresource.com/conscience-alley/>

<https://dramaresource.com/hot-seating/>