



## *The Big Dry*

By Tony Davis

### **Book Summary:**

Heat. Drought. Dust storms. More people missing every day. The city turning into a ghost town. These are not the only dangers for George and his little brother, Beeper. There's also Emily, a girl who moves like a shadow, slides through locked doors, and seems determined to push two stranded boys ever closer to disaster.

### **Curriculum Areas and Key Learning Outcomes:**

English, Language, Literacy and Literature

### **Themes**

Food security, climate change, foreign aid, isolation, survival, values, separation from family, hope and grief.

**Appropriate Ages:** 10+

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## Introduction

It is the day before George's thirteenth birthday. His father has gone into town to find food and possibly a birthday cake. George's younger brother, Beeper, is in the house. As George keeps watch for his father, a blaster hits and George runs to the house to protect his brother.

When George's father doesn't return, George becomes the man of the house. He has to protect his brother and protect the house, the fortress that keeps them safe.

Despite his efforts to keep the outside world out of his fortress, the outside world forces its way inside, in the form of Emily.

George cannot control Emily. The more time Emily spends in the house, the more George's world is upended. Beeper starts changing; the house starts falling apart; mysterious 'welfare' officers poses a threat; food and water becomes more and more scarce and George must venture out of the house into the world beyond.

As his world begins to disintegrate, so too do the boundaries that George has raised to protect himself and his brother.

Beautifully and economically written, *The Big Dry* is one of those books that touches your heart, stays with you long after you've finished the final page and says so much about the human condition – and all through three endearing and memorable characters.

### **About the author**

Tony Davis has worked as a book author, publisher, magazine editor and newspaper writer.

Originally trained on *The Australian*, he later filled a variety of editorial roles at the *Sydney Morning Herald*, including senior journalist, features editor and chief of staff. He has reported from around the world for that paper. Tony continues to write weekly for the *Herald* and *The Age* as a freelancer, and is the motoring columnist for the *Australian Financial Review*.

Tony lives in the northern suburbs of Sydney and is completing a PhD at Macquarie University.

### **Author inspiration**

Tony says:

'A few years ago I went through a stage of reading everything I could find on the American Dust Bowl of the 1930s. It was an era of extraordinary drought, dust storms and hardship which caused hundreds of thousands to leave their homes. A simple question stuck with me for a long time: what would happen if the same conditions returned to a modern Western city?

'Parallel to that, I had planned to write a story about one sibling trying to protect a younger brother or sister against all the odds. Maybe it would be in a civil war, maybe in a time of great poverty ... as I started to develop these characters, I realised a modern dust bowl could be the perfect backdrop. My characters would be not among those who fled, but those left behind. As the novel developed I would see how they changed, and found their strengths, in these appalling conditions.'

## Study notes on themes and curriculum topics

This text will be useful in addressing the Australian Curriculum: **English objectives** for years **5** and **6**.

This text could also be used to assist in the teaching of the cross-curriculum priorities of “Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia (AAEA)” and “Sustainability (SUST)”

## Learning Outcomes

Students will have the opportunity to:

- Understand how texts vary in purpose, structure and topic as well as degree of formality (ACELA 1504)
- Investigate how vocabulary choices, including evaluative language can express shades of meaning, feeling and opinion (ACELA 1525)
- Present a point of view about particular literary texts using appropriate metalanguage, and reflecting on the viewpoints of others (ACELT 1609)
- Use metalanguage to describe the effects of ideas, text structures and language features on particular audiences (ACELT 1795)
- Recognise that ideas in literary texts can be conveyed from different viewpoints, which can lead to different kinds of interpretations and responses (ACELT 1610)
- Creating literary texts using realistic and fantasy setting and characters that draw on worlds represented in texts students have experienced (ACELT 1612)
- Make connections between student’s own experiences and those of characters and events represented in texts drawn from historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT 1613)
- Create literary texts that adapt or combine aspects of texts students have experienced in innovative ways (ACELT 1618)
- Experiment with text structure and language features and their effects in creating literary texts, for example, using imagery, sentence variation, metaphor and word choice (ACELT 1800)
- Identify and explore ideas and viewpoints about events, issues and characters represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT 1619)

- Participate in and contribute to discussions, clarifying and interrogating ideas, developing and supporting arguments, sharing and evaluating information, experiences and opinions (ACELY 1708)
- Analyse strategies authors use to influence readers (ACELY 1801)
- Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive texts, choosing and experimenting with text structures, language features, images and digital resources appropriate to purpose and audience (ACELY 1714)
- Use a range of software, including word processing programs, learning new functions as required to create texts (ACELY 1717)

### Pre-reading and reading strategies

- The novel is called *The Big Dry* and features a lone child on the cover. What do you think this tells the reader about the novel before they begin?
- Tony Davis above mentions that the part of the idea for *The Big Dry* grew from an interest in the **American Dust Bowl in the 1930s**. What was the American Dust Bowl? From what you can find about it, what kind of imagery does this time and place make you think of? What relationship do you think the events of this time have to the themes in the novel?
- To evoke the feel of this time, you can show students a section of the film *The Dust Bowl* by Ken Burns:
- <http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl/>
- Activity: Have the students draw up a chart on their expectations of themes, characters and events based on *The Dust Bowl*. After you have studied the novel, go back to the chart and see how accurate these predictions were.
  
- Read the introduction on page one. Use this introduction to create a visual representation of what you think the novel will be about. After finishing the novel, create a new visual representation. How is the new representation the same and/or different from the initial representation.
- The first chapter of a novel sets up the readers expectations. Reread the first chapter and underline all of the words you are drawn to. Create a two column table. On the left hand side write the word that you underlined, on the right hand side insert a visual representation of the word. Using a think, pair, share, identify what you think is going to happen in the novel.

## Literacy and language

*The Big Dry* is an example of **literary fiction**. Literary fiction is not necessarily a genre, but there are characteristics that books of this type share.

*The Big Dry* is told through George's inner world. The challenges that each of the characters faces, and their desire to overcome them, connects to the reader on an emotional level. The growth of each character (George particularly) is an example of a literary device called **bildungsroman, or coming of age novel**.

**Setting** is an important feature in literary fiction. Setting helps to create a mood for the novel and a place for the reader to anchor the story. *The Big Dry* is set in an unknown place and time. The reader assumes it is Australia and it is in the not too distant future. The physical setting of the novel is desolate and oppressive which is in juxtaposition with the characters who live in hope.

George starts the novel as a highly introverted character who does not like making contact with anyone outside the house. As his interactions with strangers and Emily increase and his world begins to crumble, George begins to long for a wider community and less isolation.

- Choose three quotes from George that show he is driving the changes in the novel as he changes his view on the world.

The use of language is an important feature of literary fiction. Tony Davis uses a number of literary devices in the novel. The use of harsh sounding language which invokes disturbing and distressing images for the reader is called a **cacophony**. For example, when describing the aftermath of the blaster, Tony Davis uses strong words that are both visual and aural to amplify the terror that the boys are experiencing:

The wind rattled the sheets of corrugated iron that were lashed to the roof. George put his fingers in his ears. There was a tearing noise, it sounded like one of the sheets had been ripped off and blown away. (p 13)

- Find two to three more examples of the use of cacophony in the novel. Identify the sense that the language is appealing to.

**Personification** is where an author gives an object human like qualities. In *The Big Dry* Tony Davis personifies the dust and sand. This adds to the sense of oppression presented by the desolate environment.

He imagined millions of specks of dust working their way through the edges of doors and windows, between the iron sheets and the tiles on the roof, between the shifting floorboards. And through the damaged roof. (pp 16-17)

By personifying the dust and sand, Davis has enabled this to be as big a threat to the safety of the characters as other humans.

'The whole building had been abandoned to the sand.' (p 64)

**Evocative language** and the use of **imagery** is a feature of literary fiction. Evocative language helps to paint a picture for the reader and to make an emotional connection to the content rather than the use of factual language.

- The first two paragraphs of the novel are examples of evocative language. The paragraphs paint a picture of a boy staring into the dusty street. A street with no colour, no people, no movement. It is hard to imagine why a boy is alone in a place like this and what he could be looking for.

'George stood on the sandstone wall in front of his house and stared down the dusty street.' (p 1)

And:

'The rooftops, the shells of abandoned houses, the dead trees were all the same drab shades of beige and brown. No cars, no people, no sound.' (p 7)

*Activity:* Rewrite the first two paragraphs in factual language. Using a think, pair, share strategy, discuss how the meaning of the text changes between emotive and factual language.

*Activity:* Choose two to three examples of emotive language that you found powerful in the novel. Write out the examples and discuss why you choose them.

The majority of the novel is written in the past tense. Davis uses two techniques to help provide the back story. The first technique is **stream of consciousness**. This technique is shown with George, who tells the story through his memory and thoughts. The second technique is **flashback** which also reveals important information about the characters and their story. Often these techniques are combined.



George thought of the night Mr Carey dressed up as clown and walked around with a brass horn with a rubber bulb at the end. Every time he squeezed it, George's baby brother Edward laughed. That night, he said his first word other than "Mumma" and "Dadda". (p 83)

"'Beep!' he said, and he followed it with 'Beep! Beep! Beep!'" (p 83)

The quote above reveals important information about Mr Carey and Beeper. What do you learn from this flashback?

Identify two to three other examples of stream of consciousness and/or flashback in the novel. What do these tell the reader about the characters or the story?

## Themes

### Food security

The issues of food security, and to a degree, climate change, are no longer as prevalent in the news today as they were in the 1980's and 1990's (economic crisis and terrorism have taken higher priority). However, food security and malnutrition are still major problems in the world today. The United Nation's estimates that over one billion people worldwide are undernourished.

Africa is not the only continent to experience food security issues due to drought. In the late 1990's, the Australian Government provided millions of dollars in aid to drought effected countries in the Pacific region including: PNG, Fiji and Indonesia.

With their parents missing, George and Beeper are unable to meet the **three pillars** for food security.

1. **Food availability:** they have insufficient quantities of food and receive their food at irregular intervals.
2. **Food access:** as children, neither George nor Beeper have sufficient resources to obtain appropriate food.
3. **Food use:** George and Beeper have limited knowledge of water sanitation, access to adequate water or knowledge of basic nutrition and care.
  - Identify a time when you were extremely hungry and a time when you were extremely thirsty. What lead to these circumstances? How were they resolved?

- Traditionally, people associate countries in Africa with drought and food security issues. How did you feel when you heard countries near Australia have also suffered from food security issues due to drought?
- Considering issues such as climate change and global warming, do you think it would be likely that Australia could become affected by drought to the point where food security is a challenge? Explain your answer.
- Brainstorm the food security issues the characters face, for example hunger and thirst. Once the issues are identified, find examples in the text that illustrate these issues for example: in the second chapter, George describes how people dug bore holes to try to find water.
- Reread the scene where George and Beeper line up for water. Rewrite this scene in the form of a report. How does the emotional impact of the report and the story differ for you as a reader?

## Climate change

Closely linked to the theme of food security is the issue of climate change. The World Health Organisation shows that decreased rainfall results in less food production, and an increase in food prices. An increase in food prices has the greatest impact on people in developing nations and on low incomes (LMIC). The World Health Organisation currently estimates that an LMIC family spends between 50% and 80% of their income purchasing food. Families in some developing nations spend as little as 10% to 20% of their income on food. As food production decreases and prices rise, it is predicted that in 2020, one in five new born children will experience undernourishment.

Prior to the drought, George and Beeper had a 'normal' childhood with books, toys and other items. As the drought escalated their family shifted from being a middle to high income earning family in a developed nation to a low income family in a developing nation.

- Using a dictionary and other resources, define climate change. You can use examples in your definition.
- George identifies three major sequences in relation to the changing climate: the breaking of the first long drought when he was six, the increase in heat when he was seven to the current conditions when he is almost thirteen.

Identify any changes in climate that you have experienced in your life. What has been the impact of these changes on your life?

- George provides several examples from his family's life prior to the drought which show they were a middle to high income earning family. List these examples and what they say about life before the drought. For example, the photos of George's parents overseas show they had access to air travel, were able to afford an overseas holiday etc.
- List all of the items your family regularly purchases in a month, for example, food, mobile phone plans, school fees, games etc. Imagine your family's income has been reduced and 50% is now spent on basic food items. What other items would you keep? List these in order of necessity describing why you need each item.

## Foreign aid

There are two types of foreign aid, **humanitarian** and **development**. Humanitarian aid refers to the provision of vital services such as the provision of food. Development aid refers to aid that is supplied to help a country develop economically or socially for example establishing wells and farms to establish self sufficient communities.

Foreign aid has often been criticised in relation to its effectiveness that is the improvements achieved in relation to the money spent. The OECD is monitoring the effectiveness of foreign aid programs. The analysis of the OECD data is still being completed. It is the goal of the OECD (and the countries who contribute to foreign aid administered by OECD) that the number of people who are hungry will be halved by 2015. This goal has currently been slowed down due to the global economic crisis and other factors.

The Australian Government estimates that it will spend \$416.7 million in 2012/2013 to support programs that target food security. This money will be used in humanitarian and development aid projects. This is a reduction of \$44.7 million on the 2011/2012 budget.

- Define the term 'foreign aid'. Give examples.
- Emily refers to food shipments and the challenges of gaining food sent from the "wet countries". What do you think the wet countries are?

- The aid from the wet countries is an example of humanitarian aid. Using a flow chart identify how you think the process of collecting food from foreign aid works in the novel. How would you improve this process?
- Identify why you think there are no references to development aid in the novel. You may have more than one answer.

## Isolation

Isolation and being alone drives the actions and behaviours of a number of the characters in the novel. If a person is on their own or disconnected from their community, they can act in ways that they would not normally behave. Isolation can also change the way a person perceives themselves as well as the way they perceive those around them. George becomes aggressive towards Emily when she intrudes into his isolated world, his house, rather than behaving in a friendly and engaging way. Emily becomes aloof and suspicious of other people. Mr Carey stops interacting with people in his neighbourhood.

- Identify a time when you have felt alone and isolated. Describe the way this felt.
- List the ways each George, Emily and Mr Carey behave before and after the drought. Organise these behaviours using two Venn diagrams, one labelled **before the drought** the other labelled **after the drought**. What similarities and differences do you notice in their behaviour and actions?
- Mr Carey isolates himself physically from the rest of the community. Reread the description of Mr Carey's house and identify the three ways he has isolated himself.

'He glanced at the house next door, with its metal front door and 'Keep Out' signs. Old Mr Carey stood behind one of his upstairs windows, staring down through the filthy glass.' (p 3)

- Write a series of journal entries for Mr Carey starting before the drought when Mrs Carey was alive and finishing at the end of the novel. The journal entries should show how Mr Carey becomes more isolated in his house as well as how his perception of George and Beeper changes throughout the novel.

## Separation from family

A strong theme in the novel is separation from family. There are several forms of separation, these include: forced separation by 'welfare'; forced separation by conscription; separation as people seek refugee status; separation due to geographic events; separation due to illness and death; separation due to unknown causes.

- Choose one form of separation listed above. List the characters that are affected by this kind of separation. How does this separation affect the daily life of these characters? Give examples.
- Choose one form of separation above. Using the internet, your community and other resources, link the form of separation to life today. For example, find out what countries have compulsory conscription and national service. Use a graphics organiser such as a **KWL** (What I Know, What I Want to know, What I Learnt) to organise your research. [See **Black line masters**]
- Create an illustration, either by hand or digitally, that shows an example of separation from family in the novel. It may be separation for one character such as Mr Carey or many characters such as those looking for their relatives in town.

## Hope

The physical isolation, overwhelming dust and heat and lack of food and water present a situation that is seemingly hopeless. Despite these circumstances, each of the characters still holds on to a hope for a better future. The characters in the novel also show they are resilient regardless of their circumstances.

The Rabbitoh Man is an example of a character who experiences hope on a daily basis. Despite losing his belongings and merchandise, he is still positive and generous in his interactions with George and Beeper.

- Identify the ways George stays hopeful for a better future
- Why do you think George tells Beeper the story of the 'water barons'?
- Why do you think the Rabbitoh Man stays so positive? What do you think his role is in the novel?
- What is the advantage of telling a story like this from the point of view of a child?
- If this novel was told from the point of view of an adult do you think it would be hopeful?

- Define the term **resilient**. Choose one character and discuss how they demonstrate the characteristics of a resilient person. Use examples from the novel to support your discussion.

### Grief

Each character in the novel experiences grief and loss. George, Beeper and Emily are dealing with the loss and grief associated with losing a parent and family. The Rabbitoh Man experiences loss in terms of his livelihood as well as his belongings.

- Choose one of the minor characters in the novel and describe their experience with grief and or loss.

## Questions and activities

Imagine you have been asked to make a DVD cover for a film version of *The Big Dry*. Design your cover and explain why you chose each of the elements.

Create a character profile for each of the main characters in the text.

Use a graphics organiser such as a 'text to world connections chart' to link themes in the text to the world. For example create a chart with "The text said..." in the left hand column and "This reminded me of..." in the right hand column.

The development in George's character is revealed through his actions, his thoughts and his interactions with others. As the novel progresses, George's attitude towards the situation they are in and the main people in his life changes. Use a graphics organiser such as a 'characters trait chart' to track the changes in George's character throughout the novel. For example in the left hand column identify the 'trait' and in the right hand column identify 'How this was revealed'.

Using clues from the novel, write a paragraph describing what you think happened to one of the following characters:

- George and Beepers' mum
- George and Beepers' dad
- Emily's parents

Create a multi-modal text, for example, a digital picture book, that continues the story but from Beeper's point of view. Start the text with the last paragraph in the novel.

*Activity:* Choose one paragraph in the novel and identify the vocabulary choices used by the author to express meaning, feeling and opinion. Rewrite one to three paragraphs from your chosen from the point of view of an adult male or female.

The challenges faced by George, Beeper and Emily are being faced by children in the Asia-Pacific region today. Why do you think Tony Davis chose to set his novel in a country that could be Australia?

Identify a country in the Asia-Pacific region where food security, climate change and one other theme of the novel affects the lives of children on a daily basis, for example East Timor. Create a AVD (annotated visual diagram) either in hard copy or digitally, that shows what life is like for children in the country you have chosen. Use a graphics organiser such as a Venn Diagram or a Compare and Contrast Chart to show how does this compare to the lives of George, Beeper and Emily?

**Black line masters****KWL Chart**

What I Know...

What I **W**ant to Know...

What I Learnt

What I Know...	What I <b>W</b> ant to Know...	What I Learnt

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**Text to world connections**

The text said...

This reminded me of...


**Character trait chart**

Trait

How this was revealed

Trait	How this was revealed

## Bibliography

### Film

*The Dust Bowl* Dir. Ken Burns, Florentine Films and Weta, 2013, film

United Nations: Global food security

<http://www.un-foodsecurity.org/background>

World Health Organisation: Food security

<http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story028/en/>

AusAid

<http://www.usaid.gov.au/Pages/home.aspx>

OECD

<http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/usefulaideffectivenessdocuments.htm>

## About the author of these notes

Rachel Ford began her professional career as teacher after completing a double degree in Arts and Teaching. Rachel also has a Master of Education and is currently studying a Master of Business Administration. Rachel has worked as a publisher in Melbourne and Sydney. She currently lives in Sydney where she works as a freelance writer and publisher.