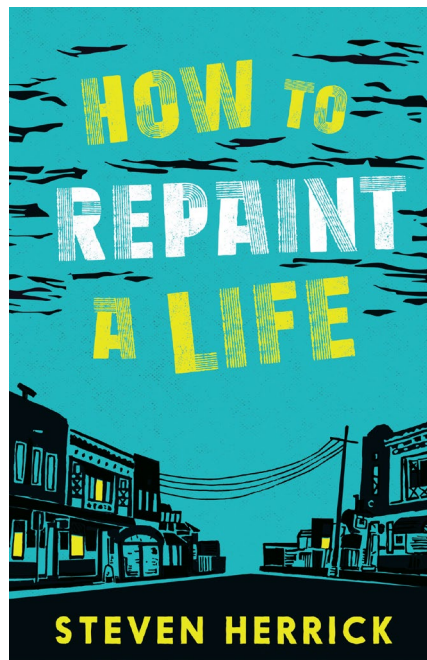


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HOW TO REPAINT A LIFE

Steven Herrick



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

When Isaac steps foot in a small country town with nothing but his backpack and some loose change, he is determined to never look back. He finds refuge in a modest cafe where the owner unexpectedly offers him kindness and hope. Then he meets Sophie, a budding artist who's not sure what to do after school ends. As their friendship grows, Isaac and Sophie dare to dream about their futures.

Against the backdrop of punk music, graffitied advertisements and linocuts, the themes of love, courage and acceptance are contrasted with bullying, domestic violence and homelessness. In this way, Steven Herrick tackles the importance of forging one's destiny guided by values such as honesty, trust and compassion.

THEMES

- Relationships
- Courage
- Kindness
- Loneliness
- Trust
- Bullying
- Love
- Art
- Domestic Violence
- Homelessness

WRITING STYLE

How to Repaint a Life is told through a range of third person perspectives. Written in present tense, the narrative unfolds the experiences of Isaac, Sophie and her dad, Gerry. Isaac has fled from a drunk and violent father whose abuse drove his mother away years earlier. A thoughtful and sensitive boy, Isaac is fearful that he too will resort to violence when life throws up obstacles. Removed from his hometown, however, his positivity, kindness and sense of decency are infectious. When he convinces Joan to employ him at her quiet cafe in exchange for coffee, she is unaware he is sleeping rough. When she discovers this later, her trust in him does not waiver. In this way, she poses as a mother figure for Isaac. Her actions, together with those of Sophie and Gerry, destigmatise homelessness. Sophie, meanwhile, is passionate about linocuts and dreams of attending art college in Melbourne. The relationship she shares with her parents could not be further removed from that of Isaac and his father. When Sophie and Isaac meet, there is an instant attraction that goes beyond the physical; they are soul mates who help one another forge their futures.

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The inclusion of poetry, punk music references and anti-advertising graffiti at the hands of Sophie's dad, Gerry, lends this text an interesting inter-generational dimension. Because of its themes and use of explicit language, *How to Repaint a Life* is suited to older readers.

STUDY NOTES

- The first chapter of *How to Repaint a Life* is instantly arresting. Discuss the language features used to create a sense of urgency and tension. What else makes this chapter so evocative?
- What did you think would happen when Isaac picked up the hammer? How are the emotions of Isaac's scenario made so vivid?
- After reading the first chapter, discuss how you feel about Isaac and his home life. What helps you to empathise with him? How does his character develop as the narrative progresses?
- After finishing Chapter 1, make predictions about the remainder of the text. After finishing the text, re-read the first few pages of *How to Repaint a Life*. What stands out to you that ties into later parts of the story?
- Find images online that capture the descriptions of Isaac's hometown. Apart from fleeing his father's violence, what else is Isaac happy to leave behind? Why is Sophie's town so much more endearing to Isaac?
- Using the description on p. 5, as well as other details that emerge throughout the novel, make a sketch of Isaac's house. Discuss how language features have been used to help readers visualise this setting.
- How does Steven Herrick use 'Show Don't Tell' to establish an authentic sense of Isaac's home life?
- Discuss how Chapters 1 and 2 follow a similar structure, including the use of the hammer and pfeil. How does this help readers to understand that although Isaac and Sophie have differences, their doubts and fears are alike? What does this tell us about the process of growing up?
- As you read, create a sociogram that captures the relationship that Sophie has with Gerry and Dana. How are her interactions with each of them different? How are they the similar? How do these contrast with the relationship Isaac has with his parents?
- Why does Gerry refer to his graffiti as 'editing the world' (p. 9)? How does this reflect his values and love for punk music?
- Why does Dana discourage Sophie from becoming an artist? What is it that helps Sophie to see past her mum's reservations?
- What impact does Rebecca's leaving town have on Sophie? How do we know?
- After Rebecca leaves, why does Sophie regard herself as 'the empty space, the bit that's cut out' of linocut prints (p. 19)?

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- Why does Sophie choose to go to Joan's Cafe rather than Grind? How are these two cafes different? What is the connection between Isaac 'repainting his life' and the alterations he makes at Joan's Cafe?
- What does Sophie mean when she says 'the teenage male citizens of her town have all the appeal of a milkshake without malt, a song without lyrics and a life without art' (p. 16)? How does Isaac challenge this?
- What does Sophie's linocut of the 'Owl on the Cubbyhouse' symbolise (see p. 17 and p. 51)? What does she hope it will express?
- What is it about linocut art that Sophie is so passionate about? Why is she determined that her art becomes more 'jagged, more ... blotchy, messy' (see p. 18)? View examples of linocuts online to discuss. Alternatively, use picture books by Narelle Oliver to further explore this medium.
- Examine the front cover of *How to Repaint a Life*. How does the linocut reflect important elements of the narrative?
- Create a character profile of a minor character such as Butler, Lachlan, Joan, Dana or Sienna. How is the character you chose important to the story? Choose a scene from the text to write from their perspective.
- Narratives need problems. What problems has Steven Herrick included in *How to Repaint a Life*? Discuss the way in which tension is created when characters do things they wouldn't normally do.
- Steven Herrick uses figurative language throughout the novel to enhance the reading experience. Discuss the impact these devices have on the text. Examples include:
 - He looked like a killer but was as gentle as sleep (p. 3)
 - Isaac's father charges through the door, grunting like a bull (p. 4)
 - A hot westerly wind blows through town, creaking gates, loosening the corrugated-iron roofs, coating everything in a suffocating dust. Dry lightning flashes in the distance (p. 4)
 - It cartwheels through the sky and pitches on the roof (p. 4)
 - A whirly wind dances through the bush and skitters across the road, sucking cigarette butts and potato crisp wrappers into a dusty column (p. 5)
 - A posse of utes rumbles past, their tyres humming on the bitumen (p. 6)
 - Farmhouses bake on dry hills above dams that are cracked and empty, sheep cluster in patches of shade and a lone tractor plows a paddock (p. 6)
 - Music jangles in the space between Sophie and her dad (p. 11)
 - Families scattered like confetti (p. 15)
 - Cicadas thrum the rhythm section late into the night (p. 21)
 - He picks through the offerings like an old lady at a food stand (p. 58)

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- The street is parched and hazy, worn out from the heat (p. 99)
- 'It's a tunnel of colour' (p. 107)
- 'My parents and I swim in purple' (p. 107)
- The car stutters over a cattle grate (p. 108)
- A wisteria vine trails from the ceiling, quilting the space with fragrance (p. 111)
- A single cicada starts thrumming, and a few seconds later the chorus hums. A flap of wings applauds in the darkness (p. 123)
- Main Street echoes with Sunday-morning emptiness (p. 126)
- They walk with an ungainly stride because of their shoes. It's like a tribe of tap dancers invading the cafe (p. 127)
- A shake of the head. Bruised clouds, a hustling wind, tension in the air. Anger building like a storm (p. 141)
- The moonlight washes across the kitchen (p. 158)
- The wind filtered down from the hills and rippled the surface (p. 178)
- A plume of smoke wiggles skywards. Above the town, a single hawk floats (p. 187)
- Isaac trudges the streets of town until the grassy footpaths give way to open road and bone-dry paddocks (p. 201)
- A flock of cockatoos land in a recently sown field, white dots in the furrowed soil (p. 201)
- The fields are tinder-dry despite the recent rain, sage bush and wild grass bent to the wind (p. 202)
- A fingernail moon hovers between the gutter and the grevillea (p. 244)
- A flock of galahs land in the gum tree on the far bank. Their screeching cuts through the dry air (p. 255)
- What does Gerry's poem 'Talking one night' on pp. 22–23 express about love? How does this reflect the love portrayed in *How to Repaint a Life*?
- What is the significance of Trudie liking Gerry's poetry and wanting to attend art college? How does this help Sophie become more confident in her decisions?
- How does Steven Herrick share with readers what is it like to sleep rough and scrounge for food? How does Sophie react when she discovers this about Isaac? How would you have reacted if in her shoes? How do characters like Sophie, Joan and Gerry help destigmatise homelessness? In the role of Sophie, write a reflection about discovering Isaac is homeless and searching for food in bins.
- Why does Isaac wish 'he was as invisible as he feels' (p. 47)?
- Why does Isaac see himself as being like the 'hundreds of moths and insects' flying around the beam of the streetlight (p. 48)?

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- As the story unfolds, Isaac recounts episodes from his past such as the days leading up to his mother's leaving. Why has Steven Herrick structured *How to Repaint a Life* in this way, 'drip-feeding' such information to readers?
- In what ways is *How to Repaint a Life* a story about loneliness and friendship?
- Although she feels there may not be a career in art, why does Sophie still decide she wants to go to art college? How do Gerry and Dana continue to be creative in their lives? Why is this important?
- Ms Reynolds says to Sophie 'you can write your own story' (p. 54). What is *your* story? How would you write it?
- Ms Reynolds says, 'being young is about getting it wrong over and over, and enjoying the process' (p. 55). How is this sentiment echoed in *How to Repaint a Life*? What experiences have you had that align with this sentiment?
- How is Joan's life similar to and different from that of Isaac's mother?
- How do Joan and Isaac help one another? What do they learn from each other? In what ways is Joan a mother figure for Isaac?
- What does Gerry mean when he says to Isaac 'Sometimes [...] our parents teach us the right way by doing it wrong' (p. 70)?
- On the day she was born, Gerry promised never to lie to Sophie. What evidence is there of this in *How to Repaint a Life*?
- What is the significance of Sophie getting her hair cut to the themes of *How to Repaint a Life*? How does Julia the hairdresser help Sophie in her quest to better understand herself?
- After getting her hair cut, Sophie feels she must explain herself to everyone. Have you ever felt this way? Write a reflection to share.
- In Chapter 13, Isaac recounts his father's birthday. How does this episode help readers to better understand Isaac?
- What is it about Isaac that Sophie likes so much? What do you like about his character? What can you learn from Isaac about resilience, kindness and positivity?
- Why, after using violence against his father, does Isaac feel 'ashamed' rather than satisfied (p. 102)?
- Discuss Isaac's comment that 'what we own [...] isn't who we are' (p. 122).
- Why, after Gerry and his cyclist friends come to Joan's for coffee, does a tear run down Isaac's cheek 'which he refuses to wipe away' (p. 129)?
- Sophie asks 'is it okay for your parents to be your best friends?' (p. 134) What do you think? Discuss with a partner.
- How are relationships between parents and their children explored in *How to Repaint a Life*?

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- Lachlan is an interesting minor character. Why does he follow Butler, yet apologise for his actions? Why did Steven Herrick include a character like this in *How to Repaint a Life*? In the role of Lachlan, write a journal entry about wanting to apologise to Sophie.
- Discuss Butler's motivation for his actions and behaviour. What might the relationship between Butler and his father, the mayor, be like? What can we infer from the text to draw these conclusions? What advice would you give Butler?
- In what ways does *How to Repaint a Life* fit with the #MeToo movement?
- When he visits the church, does Isaac consider lighting a candle to forgive or forget his mother? Does he think she is worth remembering? Discuss.
- How does Gerry live out his values and beliefs in his job at the council?
- Why is Isaac reluctant to get a library card? Why is this scene included in the narrative?
- Patchett Bend is a precious place for Sophie and her parents. Why does she decide to take Isaac there? Why does she make a linocut of it for Isaac and her parents? Where is your special place? Create a visual reminder of this place.
- Why does Butler throw a rock through the window of Joan's Cafe? Why is Isaac reluctant to tell Joan who threw it? How did you feel when Sophie recorded Butler's confession?
- Why and how do Sophie, Trudie and Sienna become friends? Why is this an important part of the text?
- Why, when Isaac sees the slouch hat at Butler's farm, does he suddenly feel ashamed?
- Isaac remembers reading letters from World War I soldiers. What does he mean when he says 'what was significant about every letter was what they didn't mention' (p. 205)? What isn't Isaac sharing about his own story?
- What is the correlation between Sophie sleeping alone in her cubby as a child and Isaac sleeping rough at the racetrack? What is the difference between their experiences?
- Why does Sophie decide to create a linocut of a naked human form? How does this reflect her coming of age?
- Discuss Sienna's observation that 'maybe we spend too long being a mirror to what others expect' (p. 231). Why is this problematic?
- How is bullying addressed in *How to Repaint a Life*? What strategies have various characters in the text used to deal with being bullied?
- What does Isaac mean when he talks about people 'future-proofing' themselves (p. 237)? How has he tried to future-proof himself? Is it working? Why does Sophie suggest that he talk about his past instead?

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- In what ways is *How to Repaint a Life* a book about growing up?
- When he wakes up in the small room above Joan's Cafe, Isaac decides he 'hadn't been homeless in this town' (p. 270), but says he was homeless when living with his father. He goes on to say, 'his father was homeless'. What does he mean?
- Why do Isaac's eyes change from ones that are 'cloaked [...] red-rimmed, or vacant' to eyes that 'sparkle' (p. 271)?
- How is Isaac's life different from yours? What have you learnt about yourself by reading *How to Repaint a Life*?
- Select a character from *How to Repaint a Life* on whom to create and perform a monologue. Include costuming and/or props that would suit your scene.
- Discuss the friendship that develops between Isaac and Gerry. How do they help one another?
- How do you feel when Isaac finally talks about his father? Why is it important that he shares his upbringing in this way? What happens to Isaac after this?
- Create a story map of *How to Repaint a Life* using the chapter headings as a guide.
- What does it mean to 'repaint a life'? How do both Isaac and Sophie do this? Who else in the text repaints their lives? Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.
- Listen to and read the lyrics of music by The Buzzcocks and others mentioned in the text, such as Billy Bragg, The Undertones and Sham 69. How are the ideas behind the punk movement realised in *How to Repaint a Life*? How does Joan use these ideas to attract the kind of customers she wants in her cafe?
- Watch 'Haunted' by The Pogues on YouTube. How does it reflect 'Beauty in ugliness / Strength in fragility / Happiness in sorrow' (p. 80)?
- Write a chapter of *How to Repaint a Life* to follow the final chapter, set twelve months later.
- Read Steven Herrick's verse novel *The Simple Gift* as a companion text to *How to Repaint a Life*.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

How to Repaint a Life has an origin spanning more than twenty years. That's how long I've been visiting schools to talk to students about my verse novel *The Simple Gift*. I'm always surprised and excited to see how involved the students are in that story. They ask endless questions, many of which I answer inadequately. There's so much 'left out' of that book, and for many years those omissions have gnawed at me. Every question I can't answer in a classroom adds to this feeling.

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It isn't that I believe *The Simple Gift* is somehow lacking. But it tells a limited story that skips over certain issues raised by homelessness, family violence, being a parent, friendship and loneliness. No book can perfectly answer every question, or address every issue. But the more the students responded positively to *The Simple Gift*, the more I was drawn to consider writing a prose novel based on similar themes, only this time addressing some of those omissions of the verse novel.

I hope *How to Repaint a Life* works as an independent sister-book to *The Simple Gift*, yet stands alone as a novel with a genesis in hundreds of thoughtful questions and responses from students all over the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Herrick is the author of twenty-six books for children and young adults. His books have twice won the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards and have been shortlisted for the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards on nine occasions. He is widely recognised as a pioneer of the verse-novel genre for young adults. He is also the author of eight travel books. He spends nine months of the year visiting schools in Australia and three months on his bicycle, travelling around, pedalling slowly and thinking about his next book. www.stevenherrick.com.au