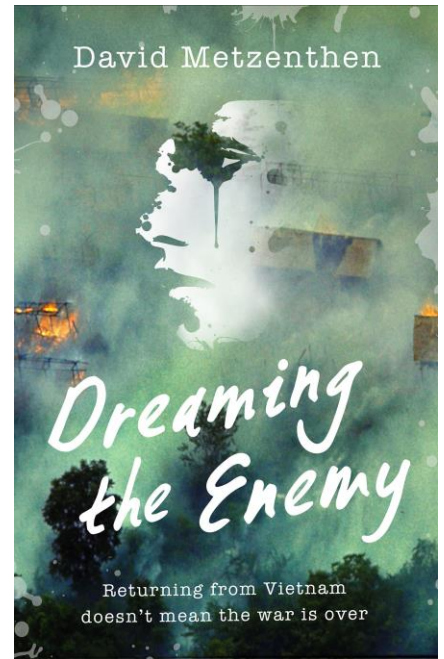


# Dreaming the Enemy

By David Metzenthén

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## Summary

*Dreaming the Enemy* is the story of Aussie country boy Shoey (Johnny Shoebridge) and Vietnamese Khan, both recently returned Vietnam War veterans from opposing sides. The two boys' stories run in parallel, flashing back to life before the war and forward to their present-day struggles to return to 'normal' life back home.

David Metzenthén is unsurpassed in his ability to get inside the minds of complex young men, and make us feel deeply about what happens to them. Meticulously researched, this is a book that does not shy away from the reality of the Vietnam War – the battles scenes are vivid, and both men lose their two closest friends in the same engagement – but at its core it is a story of redemption: Is forgiveness possible? Who or what can help? And can these young men, after seeing what they've seen and doing what they've done, find their way back to some sense of hope for the future?

The story finishes positively and has wide application for study. It is not too graphic and concentrates more on the psychology of Johnny Shoebridge and others rather than the acts of violence taking place in combat.

The book is a work of fiction built on factual events. The battle scenes are based around actual battles fought in Vietnam by Australian & New Zealand troops.

## Links to the curriculum

A classroom study of *Dreaming the Enemy* is relevant to the following **Australian Curriculum Learning Areas** covering, in general, Year Levels 9-11 (roughly age levels 14-16):

- English
- Humanities and Social Sciences (History and Geography).

It is also relevant to the following **Australian Curriculum General Capabilities**:

- Literacy
- Personal and Social Capability
- Intercultural Understanding
- Critical and Creative Thinking
- Ethical Understanding

## Australian Curriculum Cross-curriculum Priorities:

There is some relevance of *Dreaming the Enemy* to the Priority of Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia.

It could be a useful adjunct to studies of psychology and philosophy.

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# In the classroom...



## Themes

Vietnam War, trauma, PTSD, resilience and recovery, identity, belonging, forgiveness, conscription.

And as the author has said:

This book is about war and its consequences. ...where people fight in foreign countries then the repercussions are always severe on all involved. This book is about being ordered to kill by your government, it is about suffering, it is about the value of life, conscription, communism, family, connection to your country, loyalty, bravery, recovery, empathy, Australia, men, women, love and hate, Melbourne, the beach, politicians and individuals...This book was not written as an action-orientated, shock-horror war novel, but as a philosophical story about people.

## Activities and discussion questions

- Draw a map of Vietnam showing the political border between North and South at the time of the war. Include the years that Australian troops operated there. Make a list of the places, battles locations and landmarks referred to in the novel, and mark as many as you can onto the map, showing where Johnny and Khan went.
- Examine the preface at the beginning of the novel, written by a real-life Australian veteran of the Vietnam War. What does the quotation mean? Why has the author chosen to include it?
- The story is narrated in the third-person, in a very personalised style. Discuss the writing style by looking at Chapter One as an example of the book. Why do you think the author chooses to use this style? Rewrite some of the paragraphs of Chapter One in a less personalised way. What effect might this achieve?
- Is Khan as “real” as Johnny? Comment on the extent to which Khan is a figment of Johnny’s imagination. Explain why the novel’s title is relevant to this discussion.
- Johnny and Khan’s personal journeys are told in tandem. Discuss the extent to which, in many ways, both stories are the same. What is the purpose of this?
- Drawing from your observations of Johnny and Khan, comment on the similarities and differences between the Australian soldiers’ close-up perspective of the war, and the perspective of the North Vietnamese soldiers. Look at such issues as commitment to a cause, dedication, and attitudes to sacrifice. You may also find Khan’s relationship with Son, after the war, of relevance.
- Create a pen portrait of Johnny before he was conscripted to Vietnam, comparing it to the Johnny who arrives back home. Why does he refer to himself as “damaged goods”? Do you agree? Is he a danger? How does he compare to, say, another fictionalised returned soldier from Vietnam, Rambo, in the novel, *First Blood*? (See Further Reading suggestions.)
- Comment on the range of characters Johnny meets on his journey south through New South Wales and Victoria, gauging his effect on them, and their effect on him. Why, for example, can’t he develop an ongoing relationship with Carly?
- Write a short story, or a set of connected personal diary entries, about Johnny at least one year after the events of the final chapter. What happens to him? Does he survive? Will his war ever end? Does he have to seek medical and psychological treatment for on-going trauma and suffering?
- Plan and write your own review of *Dreaming the Enemy* in 250-300 words. You will need not only to explain a little about the story and plot, but also to express your opinions about the book in general.
- If you were conscripted into the army at a time of war, how would you feel? Would you join the army and fight or try to avoid having to do so?



# In the classroom... Dreaming the Enemy

## Related texts/Further reading

By David Metzenthén

*Boys of Blood and Bone*, Penguin, 2003. 2015

*Tigerfish*, Penguin, 2014

*Jarvis 24*, Penguin, 2009

*Black Water*, Penguin 2007

### Legacy of the Vietnam War

Fiction (with thanks to Magpies THE SOURCE and on-line reviews)

*The Running Man* by Michael Gerard Bauer, Omnibus Books, 2004

A beautifully paced book about facing fears, breaking free of the boxes we build around ourselves because of these fears, and taking the time to understand others, particularly those damaged by tragedy. An outstanding novel. Reading Age 13 to 16.

*Jimmy Moran – Regular* by Ken Catran, illustrated by Gaston Vanzet, Lothian, 2005

Jimmy is the son and grandson of decorated soldiers. He sees his chance in the Vietnam War to fight clear of his father's shadow. But Vietnam will bring its own demons and split the family. Like father and grandfather, Jimmy will carry the scars of conflict.

*In Country* by Bobbie Ann Mason, HarperCollins, 2005

Sam's father died in the war and her uncle is suffering undiagnosed PTSD. Evokes 1980s small-town American life as Sam comes to understand more about her father, her uncle and herself. (Previously set for VCE English literature study.)

*Everybody Sees the Ants* by A.S. King, Little Brown, 1997

Magic realism: Lucky retreats from reality into the jungles of Vietnam with the soldier Grandad he never knew. Gradually, his self-worth and understanding of the world grow. Reading Age 12 to 16.

*Settling South* by Steve Tolbert, Longman Cheshire 1995 (Clipper Fiction series)

Tim goes to live with his war veteran father, John, in the bush near Bright, Victoria. One of the local cops, also a veteran shares with John an excess of aggression and a feud develops. Explores fathers, revenge, war and violence and non-violence. Reading Age 12 to 15.

*Harry's War* by John Heffernan, Omnibus Books, 2011

A novel about war, storytelling and the trap of deception. Reading Age: 10 to 13.

*First Blood* (novel by David Morrell; later filmed as the first of the Rambo series.)

A novel about American trauma after the war is over.

*Tagged* by Gary Crew, illustrated by Steven Woolman, Era Publications, 1997 (graphic novel)

A lover of war comics, Jimmy is out walking one morning and discovers a bearded and scruffy man dozing in a derelict factory, but why is the man alone and rambling, haunting the dark places of the city?

*Hey Joe* by Michael Hyde, Vulgar Press, 1997, republished by Lothian 2005

Draws on the author's experience of anti-war protests in Melbourne in the 1960s-70s.

*The Impossible Knife of Memory* by Laurie Halse Anderson, Penguin, 2014

Though not about the Vietnam War, this highly recommended American YA novel is about a girl growing up with an itinerant father who has returned from the war in Iraq with PTSD.

# In the classroom...



## Novel with female protagonists

*A Tale of Two Families: The Diary of Jan Packard* by Jenny Pausacker, Scholastic Australia, 2000 (My Australian Story series)

Through family and a neighbour, Jan comes to understand more about the war and discovers her brother Terry was a conscientious objector. Reading Age 10 to 15.

## Non-fiction

*Red Haze: Australians and New Zealanders in Vietnam* by Leon Davidson, Lothian, 2005.

Highly recommended non-fiction account.

*Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*, edited by Bernard Edelman

Collection of soldiers' letters home. Note that some of these letters make devastating reading.

*Well Done, Those Men* by Barry Heard, Penguin, 2007

Adult Vietnam War memoir.

*The Railway Man* by Eric Lomax, also adapted into a film version

Autobiography; themes of PTSD and forgiveness after World War Two. Note that the film's POW torture scenes are violent.

*If This is a Man* and *The Truce* by Primo Levi

About Jewish Holocaust during World War Two, often published together in the same book; themes of trauma, loss of identity, survival. Can anyone forgive an enemy who committed such acts?)

## Websites

Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia (with excellent web links)

<http://www.vvaa.org.au/>

This American site, about PTSD, may be of interest to teenage readers:

<http://www.npr.org/2012/08/17/159023437/ptsd-not-just-war-wound-young-people-suffer-too>

## The author

### About writing *Dreaming the Enemy*, David says:

I decided to try and write a novel for young adults about the experiences of Australian soldiers in the Vietnam War, not because I have always been fascinated by that conflict, but because I felt the men who fought in it on the orders of the Australian Government were subjected to an incredibly difficult experience that should not be forgotten. When I looked at photographs of the Australian soldiers, and saw how young most were, I felt that someone should try to present aspects of their story to young Australian readers of a similar age.

There has been much non-fiction reporting of Australian involvement in the Vietnam War, and many of these books are brilliant. But I thought that a fiction writer might present a combination of stories and themes that could add a different strand to our understanding of the combat experience, and the effects of those experiences on young men and those around them. I hope that I brought to this project the integrity and honourable intentions that these diggers deserve. I certainly had their interests in my heart as I wrote, *Dreaming the Enemy*.

I have never been in the army, I have never shot anyone, and I have never suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, but what I felt I could offer to the stories of these Australians is a desire to tell some of the experiences many young soldiers had, and how it



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may have impacted on their lives. I sought to be truthful in my depiction of Johnny Shoebridge, my main character, as a returned digger. Yes, he is fictional, but he is drawn from men I have talked to, and read about, who took part in this war – and although he is a fictional character, that does not mean he cannot be truthful, or authentically drawn.

I also felt it reasonable to attempt to create Khan, an enemy North Vietnamese soldier, who haunts Johnny Shoebridge even after the war is over. The way I did this, as an expanded memory borne from Johnny's wartime experience, gives me licence to also imagine this person, Khan, and acknowledge he is a product of the mind and not a real person: yes, he represents the enemy, yet he also represents a person, a fellow human being, who was fighting for a cause he believed in, and a country and people he loved.

In war the object is to kill people. In peacetime it is then up to the surviving soldiers to process their experiences of combat, with the help of others, if they're fortunate, and so move on in their lives. As a fellow human being, I am smart enough to know that such experiences are not easily pushed aside or dealt with; the repercussions of combat are so momentous I wanted to acknowledge this suffering, to give an outline of that suffering to those who read my work, to make it known many Australians do care about what happened to people they do not know.

My book is a philosophical view of the Vietnam War, not a factual reconstruction. Perhaps, *Dreaming the Enemy* is more concerned with how war changes people than it is about war itself. *Dreaming the Enemy* does draw on actual battles that Australian battalions fought in, and at all times I have tried to write accurately and present the truth, as I understand it to be. But it might be the title, *Dreaming the Enemy*, that tells you much that you need to know about this novel: that it is an imaginative account, maybe about the minds of people and how they might be changed by experiences – good and bad – rather than a forensic logbook of battles fought in South-East Asia.

This novel is not, and was never intended to be, a definitive account of Australian soldiers who fought in Vietnam; it is, though, a story of that war, and it was written because I was fascinated by what I knew of what some men endured. I certainly felt it was a very important story to tell, in an attempt to add another piece to a jigsaw of history that will never be complete, neat, or easily understood. Especially by me.

### About the author

David Metzthen is one of Australia's pre-eminent writers for young adults and children. He has received numerous awards for excellence, including multiple CBCA honours and several wins; NSW, Queensland, Victorian and WA Premier's Literary Awards; and an Adelaide Festival Literary Award. His picture book about Gallipoli, illustrated by Michael Camilleri, won the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Children's Fiction in 2015. The award-winning *Boys of Blood and Bone* (2003) was republished by Penguin in 2014 as an Anzac Centenary Edition with a Preface from the author.

David is a Melbourne boy. He was an advertising copywriter before turning to fiction, and a builder's labourer to support his first twenty years as a writer for young people. David is a learner surfer, a keen fly fisherman, and a tree hugger from way back. He tries to write stories that will explain and entertain and be worthy of the reader's time. The natural world is where he likes to spend time, and he is a supporter of various environmental foundations. He hopes to write the perfect book, knows it will never happen, but works in hope...He has travelled overseas but is inspired by this country and hopes always to feel that way.

These curriculum notes and discussion questions were prepared by Roger Stitson. Roger is a journalist and educational writer. He has written the "Text Talk" articles for the Education section of *The Age* newspaper since 2000 and many film study guides for Screen Australia, the Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM) and individual film producers. He has produced many educational materials based on the Australian Curriculum addressing the history, social studies and Indigenous Studies curriculum. Roger is a former English, Literature and Film teacher at secondary level and a published writer of short fiction and non-fiction.