

Teachers' Notes
Written by Pam Macintyre

So Yesterday

By Scott Westerfeld

Overview

Set in New York, *So Yesterday* is definitely located in the here and now. Seventeen-year-old Hunter is a cool taster for a multinational sports clothing firm, an '*athletic shoe company named after a certain Greek god*'. In an acerbic first person voice, seventeen-year-old Hunter narrates the puzzling and sometimes threatening events. This is a clever, witty book that taps into teen obsessions with being cool, or choosing not to be. It is also a gripping mystery story as Hunter and Logo Exile 'friend' (read desirable, hope-to-be-girlfriend) Jen, track down the strange events that follow a missed appointment with Mandy, their employer, who has disappeared in strange, perhaps sinister circumstances. When Jen and Hunter go looking for Mandy little is as it appears as they are drawn into pursuing the anti-client, the Jammers. Their sleuthing tactics, inspired by television cop shows, provide funny moments.

There is no pejorative talking down to adolescents in this novel. Nor are there any adult approved, preachy lessons about being an individual, resisting the group, but rather, acknowledgment that belonging, fitting in, is important, but so is understanding the created, manipulated measures of being cool. To be cool or not: the book asks whether it is a conscious choice, or the result of accepting manipulation and artificiality. This novel treats adolescents as the savvy people they are, and is ideal for discussion. Let the young adults lead the conversations. You maybe too 'so yesterday'! Above all this is a book to be read and talked about for its wit, fun and very appealing central characters.

Introducing the book

Read Chapter zero and record your reactions to it. Read it again after you have read the whole book. Does it have different meanings/resonances?

Cool labels

- Some of the 'cool' labels are specific to US regional culture, but the fun is in guessing or working out what they might be describing. New York is almost like home to many Australian young people (and adults!) from television and movies, but what are 'ropers'? Are there Australian equivalents?
- Jammers – are they bad guys as Hunter says (p.2)? Does your perception of them change during the course of the novel?
- The Nod (definitions page 4) is used throughout the novel as a particular shorthand message. Are you aware of any other similar gestures in use?

Being cool

- Who is cooler, Hunter or Jen? Why?
- *'Cool is all about context.'* (p112) True? Examples?
- On page 237 Jen says *'...cool hunters...market research, focus groups, and all that crap. They squeeze the life out of everything.'* What is your opinion?
- Hunter is anxious because he is alone at a party (p119). *'No one likes to feel left out'*. True? Why? Is that all being cool is? Not being left out?
- Although Hunter is a cool hunter he is also rather scathing of the 'coolsters'. For example, on page 219 he says *'I recognized one of them from our coffee shop, probably one of those guys writing a first novel set in a coffee shop.'* Is he suggesting that there is "cool cool" and "pretentious cool"?
- On page 55 Jen wonders about how fast uncool happens. She didn't think making something "cool" was such an industry, that it just happened naturally. What do you think? Do you believe the premise of the book?
- Do you agree that sometimes there is a very fine line between being cool and being a crank? (p60)
- Is being cool related to money? Can you be cool if you are poor, or is it only for rich kids?

Ideas

- A central idea that runs throughout the book is the notion of freedom. What is being free? Can you ever be free? How manipulated are we?
- *'Two seconds after switching on a television show, we know whether it's from the late 1980s or last year and whether it's cop show or a sitcom or a made-for-TV movie...all this from subtle clues of lighting, camera angles, and the quality of the videotape. Instantly.'* (p124) Compile a test for the class to see if this is true.

- Jen says *'that's what they want ... for us to start questioning everything. Is this party real? This product? This social group? Is cool even real?'*(p182) Do we need the Jammers to make us question like this?
- Hunter says that *'most magazines make more money from selling their subscriber list than they do off newsstands. It's big business to know how people perceive themselves...a magazine is also a bible for a lifestyle: it tells readers what's going on, what to think about, and, most importantly what to buy next.'*(p202) What do you read and what does it say about you? Are you influenced by the values of the magazine?
- Hunter talks about *'the first rule of consumerism: never give us what we really want. Cut the dream into pieces and scatter them like ashes. Dole out the empty promises. Package our aspirations and sell them to us, cheaply made enough to fall apart.'*(p269) Has Hunter just become cynical because of losing his job etc, or is there truth in what he says?
- Page 271 is largely a repetition of the opening page of the book, but with a significant change of voice from 'we' to 'they'. Do you now read that message differently?
- Hunter says *'I've been able to spot the cool kids ever since, no matter how young or old they are... But I've never really trusted them.'*(263) Is cool by its very nature unstable and therefore untrustworthy, or do you think Hunter means something else entirely?
- What do you think is the central idea of the book – that we are all being manipulated? That we all want to be either innovators or trendsetters?

The pyramid

Page 19 describes the pyramid or cool hierarchy: a good place to start discussion:

- Innovators are at the top of the pyramid, that is the first to do, but being an innovator is not an easy thing to be (p21-22).
- Trendsetters – always ready to jump on board – when they pick up the trend it becomes cool. They have to determine whether innovation is cool or just crazy. Are they market researchers, or a joke? They are not allowed to be original.
- Early Adopters
- Consumers
- Laggards – are proud in mullets (Jason Gillespie??) and resist all change. On page 177 Hunter says that they are so ancient, so yesterday, that they're totally cutting edge, for example, skaters. While on page 236 Mwadi prefers to call them 'Classicists'. What's in a name? Is one term pejorative and the other accepting? What do you think?
- Discuss whether or not you agree with the description of the components of this pyramid. Are there any categories missing? What about Logo Exiles?

- On page 11 Hunter says that Jen was in *'Logo Exile uniform'*. Isn't that a contradiction in terms? What about Hunter being in *'cool hunting camouflage'*? What is that 'uniform'?
- On page 79 is a definition of 'future sarcastic'. Find out where this term was first used. The internet is a good place to start.
- Read the description of Hilary's outfit on pages 12-13. What does it tell us about her? What about the Cyber geeks, Silicon Alley?
- Make up some of your own styles with suitable labels. Make models, drawings or computer images of them.

Characters

The characters are distinctive and written with perceptive verisimilitude.

Hunter

- Hunter says *'It's my job to spot where cool comes from, Jen. I can see who's leading and who's following, where the trends starts and how it spreads.'* (p173) What does this tell us about Hunter?
- On page 250 Jen says about Hunter, *'You take pictures and sell them, theorize and read a lot. But you don't do anything... You watch. You analyze. You follow...But you're afraid to change anything.'* Do you agree with her? Why should Hunter have to 'change anything'?
- On page 251 Hunter says about himself and his mission to be cool, *'I was nothing but a fraud. As I'd found out from the moment we'd left Minnesota, there wasn't anything cool about me. I didn't belong with the Jammers or deserve to be with Jen'*. Can you try to be cool or does it just happen? Is Hunter being too hard on himself, or not hard enough? Do you agree that he is fraud? Why/why not?
- Hunter's ironic, cryptic voice is a strong part of the appeal of this book, even at its tensest moments. For example, on page 57 he describes the fuzzy image on Mandy's phone as *'the visual equivalent of those random calls your phone makes when it gets bored...'*
- Find some other examples of Hunter's take on the world. Does this make him realistic, or do you see him as a constructed, book character?

Jen

- Jen agrees to go to the cool tasting, even though her conscience asks her if she is selling out, being exploited (p9). Money wins. Is this realism winning out, or is Jen not as 'not cool' as she thinks?

Hunter's Parents

- Why do Hunter's parents send up his obsession with 'cool' (p27, 166-7). Is it that they don't understand?
- Hunter describes his relationship with his parents (p254): *'They aren't innovators. Not at the breakfast table. For one hour every morning they are Classicists of the best kind, my own Rock Steady Crew.'* What is the role of parents?

Humour

This is a witty, acerbic book and provides an ideal opportunity to explore the nature of humour, especially written, literary humour: how authors construct it and what it tells us about character and the ideology of the story.

Much of the humour comes from Hunter's playful, original use of language and his self-deprecating voice. The following are some examples to explore in terms of what we find amusing or clever and what it reveals about the characters in the book and the reader's idea of humour.

- The following excerpt plays on two well-known clichés and disrupts expectations: *'He...kept his eyes above her ankles. Honor among thieves'* (p12).
- *'This was just some random thought that hadn't existed before today's meeting.'* (p18)
- *'A hundred pairs of shoes and they'd never sent me a sneaker optimized for urban burglary'* (p38).
- *'Having induced mum profanity, I had to chuckle.'* (p109)
- Especially evocative of the satirical aspects of humour are Hunter's ideas about the contents of the magazine *Hoi Aristoi* – *'essays on mink coat maintenance'*, *'bargain buys for the bulimic's bathroom'* (p116). Humour also has a more serious function and this excerpt is a good springboard for examining target ('scuse the pun) audiences. For example, compare the ubiquitous catalogues of Best and Less, Kmart, Target, Myer, David Jones. Who is depicted in them (demographic) and who is not? Who are they aimed at? Imagine that they include articles and devise some titles (as did Hunter) that would be aimed at/revealing of their audiences.
- Students might fruitfully create their own magazine (titles/articles/ads) targeted at a specific audience that they know well (music, sport, movies, games, TV) – either seriously or satirically.
- The description of Hunter's room on page 184 is very visual – a *'fad history lesson'*. Could you assemble one from your possessions? And what do you think of Hunter's one innovation? What does it tell us about him? Does it make him more or less appealing?
- On page 189 Jen describes naming districts according to the dessert they served there. Does it work for your town/city?

Brands

- Just as Hunter and Jen track down Mandy, there are many brands to track down in the story. Think about how easy it is to identify them. Why? For example, *'a certain dysfunctional father saying "Sweet, sweet chocolate" (p4)*. Why does Hunter consider this cartoon character to be a 'brand'? Is he right?
- *'a certain computer company whose name is a fruit often used in making pies' (p11)*.
- *'all had first and last names, their initials wrought in tiny gold buckles' (p12)*.
- *'trilogy of movies about cyber reality and frozen kung-fu whose title ends in X' (p17)*
- *'a certain Swedish mega group whose name is a four-letter word' (p34)*.
- *'movie franchise involving frozen kung fu and lots of ammunition' (p60)*.
- *'movie franchise in which a certain weight-lifting governor plays an unsmiling robot who shoots things' (p68)*.
- *'well-known store associated with Thanksgiving Day parades and Santa Claus movies' (p87)*.
- *'a certain kitty whose first name is a common salutation' (p149)*.
- *'a certain, well-known brand of evolving monsters familiar from toys and trading cards' (p156)*.
- *'a certain science-fiction franchise that had lasted four films too long' (p185)*.
- *'a certain mega corporation known for its relentless grip on all media, including scores of newspapers and a certain faux-news channel' (p188)*.
- You could rewrite all of these using your own descriptors, or make up your own descriptions of other products/brands.
- p61 SHIFT – would you join? Can you dream up some similar ideas? See if you get any takers to join.

Everything had an Innovator

- First detective story – identify them from his descriptions – *'medieval monks who solve crimes, little old ladies, cats who solve crimes, criminals who solve crimes' (p73)*.
- Think about other first genres, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, William Gibson and cyber fiction.
- Add to the list of innovator's Hall of Fame on the last page of the book Identify other 'firsts' you've often wondered about and see if you can find their origins.

Names

- Even names have a cool status according to Hunter. On page 6 he tells us that Jennifer was the most popular name in 70s and 80s. Do a class survey to find the most popular names. What about your parents/grandparents? You might like to link this with the very funny episode of 'Kath and Kim' when they are choosing a name for Kim and Brett's baby.
- Is Hunter is too obvious a choice for the main character, or do our names create us?
- Hunter, half mockingly calls changing your name 'rebranding' (p6). Are our names brands indicating who we are? If you could change name what would you call yourself. Why? Would you feel differently about yourself? Do you think others would react differently to you? Would you be a different person with a different name?

Market research

- Big companies spend enormous amounts of money on market research. See if you can find out how much McDonalds spends on market research, for example.
- Consider the recent shift to 'healthy eating' by fast food companies. Is this a reaction to changes in society? Does it affect your choices?
- Look at the jobs in market research in the paper. What do they imply? Consider the language used, jargon, nature of position etc.
- Have you ever been contacted by a market researcher for your opinion? Did you answer truthfully? Were you aware of the answers that were wanted?

Place and setting

This novel is very New York. If you had to set it in Australia where could it happen? Are there equivalents of Fifth Avenue? Or are there different aspects of Australia that are cool?

Mystery narrative

- The circumstances surrounding Mandy's disappearance provide narrative tension in the novel. Consider the significance of the choice of setting - Chinatown – and how it affects the tone of the story and Hunter's and Jen's perceptions of what might have happened.
- Does the author use stereotyped characters for specific effect? For example, on page 49, the big guy with the shaved head represents the standard 'threatening character' doesn't he?

- Do you think Hunter and Jen decide everything is sinister, rather than it necessarily being threatening? For example, on pages 107-8 Hunter is worried about the lost phone and that his mother has been victim of whoever found it. Is his imagination overactive or do you suspect foul play?
- Which theory do you think is the most plausible (p112-3)? Are Jen and Hunter too actively imaginative? What do the invitations mean? What do you predict? Is the anti-client real and why does it want to talk to Hunter?
- Is it Mandy's fate or the lure of the shoes that is motivating Hunter? What about Jen?
- Hunter 'reads the crowd' at the party (p116). Do you do that? Why do we do it/not do it?
- The contents of the gift bag are described (p120). Consider the significance of the names, such as 'Noble Savage', PooSham. Does this give any clues to where the plot is heading?
- Is the bald guy really after Hunter or is he paranoid (p122)?
- *'The entire party was a plot to turn rich people purple'* (p125). Has Hunter lost the plot?
- The bald guy doesn't mean to sound creepy (p130-1). Is Hunter paranoid? What do you think the party is all about?
- Hunter says PooSham is pseudo product *'designed to confuse the order of things, to disrupt the sacred bond between brand and buyer...I was beginning to work out an agenda'* (p135). Are you? Predict and share your ideas providing evidence for your argument. Are you drawing on information from this book, other books, film, TV, and/or knowledge of the world?
- The anti-client is a cool hunter 'gone haywire' (p163). Is that a fair description?
- Is Mandy OK (p170)? Is Hunter over reacting?
- If it isn't about blackmail what is it about (p200)?

The anti-client

- What do you think their purpose is? Why is their mission to unglue things? (p192)
- On page 198 when Hunter looks at all the photographs of the party he comments that *'the whole machine of privilege and power became unglued before your eyes'*. Why would the Jammers want to do this? Does what Jen says on page 215 explain it? That is, trying to unglue the glue *'that controls how everyone thinks, how they see the world...advertising, marketing categories, tribal boundaries, all the formations that people get trapped in. Or locked out of.'* Are they added to the pyramid merely to 'mystify the flow'?
- On page 244 Hunter says *'maybe Innovators only channel something that's already there. Maybe the Jammers had to happen'*. What do you

think? Then later in the book he is much more critical of them. On pages 262-3 he says '*Jen, I'm not sure about the Jammers. I think they shoot for easy targets. You can't just go around rewiring people without asking...*' What do you think? Is he too cautious? Is change about risk?

Other reading

There are excellent follow up texts to pursue after reading *So Yesterday*, both written and film, such as:

- Naomi Klein, *No Logo*
- William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*
- Ian Bone, *The Song of and Innocent Bystander*
- Episodes of the ABC's 'Kath and Kim' Morgan Spurlock's documentary 'Supersize me!'

Follow-up research for those interested could include:

- What do you know about the Australian B.U.G.A.R.U.P., a billboard vigilante group whose aim was to get rid of tobacco advertising by defacing tobacco billboards? Were they the original Jammers? They started in 1976 and continued campaigning until tobacco advertising was banned in 1994. It seems they won!
- Check out Adbusters (www.adbusters.org)
- Look up Culture Jammers on the web
- Browse 'The Onion' site at www.theonion.com, and the Australian satirical e-newspaper 'The Chaser'(brought to you by the CNNNN guys) at www.chaser.com.au

SO YESTERDAY

A NOVEL BY SCOTT WESTERFELD

