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## ***Kill the Possum* by James Moloney**

**YEAR 10 - 11**

### **Background**

This tough novel explores how adolescents deal with some of the big issues and human motivations and emotions that inspire Greek tragedy and Shakespearean drama. We might be resistant to reading about such events, especially in books for young people, but to deny their existence in reality is naive and we should be grateful to writers who wish to present some sort of ordering or thinking of them. Moloney is no stranger to confronting the hard questions – parental desertion in *A Bridge to Wiseman's Cove*, cultural dislocation and prejudice in the *Dougy* trilogy, loss of faith and family breakdown in *Lost Property*, etc.

Moloney refuses to give readers clear cut explanations for behavior and events and neither does he take a clear moral stance. Rather he leaves spaces for readers to question and interpret, which makes for rich exploration in the classroom.

*Kill the Possum* throws together a group of young people who have serious issues in their lives in relation to family. Dylan is being raised by his mother after his father left when he was very young. His father has a new family in England and contact between Dylan and his father has not been constant. His father's parents form the only link he has with his father and his anger at the family life he has missed is bubbling beneath the surface of his otherwise normal teenage life.

At the story's outset Dylan is keen to get to know a girl from school, who he has been seeing, a little better and he turns up at Kirsty's house unannounced. It is here that the story becomes complex as Dylan finds himself in the centre of a cruel and tense situation. Cartwright, Kirsty's ex-step father is returning her young sister after an access visit. In the process he belittles and verbally attacks the different members of the family in a vile manner. Dylan learns later that this is a regular fortnightly Sunday activity that along with the accompanying history of violence, abuse and court dysfunction colours the lives of Kirsty, her brother Tim and their mother – their lives are ruled by the cycle of interaction with Cartwright. Each of the family members is struggling with this in different ways, the anger and fear is debilitating. Kirsty sees in Dylan a 'normal' teenage relationship that can help her forget, he also offers a support she badly needs.

The problems in Kirsty's life strike a chord with Dylan and he forms separate relationships with both Kirsty and Tim that are both destructive and supportive. Tim, like Dylan, has a background of guilt and anger over what has happened in his life that fuels his need to act. Revenge and our capacity for violence see the story spiral out of control as each character seeks an answer to an untenable situation.

## Objectives

In line with Moloney's focus on some of the big questions that drive humanity it is suggested that *Kill the Possum* be explored in relation to how it engages with a number of complex and compelling issues, issues that confront young people in many areas of their lives. The VELS positioning for this approach comes from the English domain:

*Students use writing to explore different perspectives on complex and challenging issues. Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) VELS English Domain Level 6 p24.*

## Focus: Truth, trust and lies

- These are concepts that are explored in various ways throughout the book, such as Kirsty contrasting the 'man she trusted utterly' (p60), her father, with the completely untrustworthy, manipulative Cartwright. Later she thinks 'Trust is love' (p67). Do you agree?
- Consider also how the courts treat the victims, and why Mrs Beal feels compelled to lie to save her daughter from cruel exposure in court. Is this a justifiable lie?
- Lies get the family into an awful situation, but at the end Dylan's lies also protect Tim, don't they? Or is Dylan just protecting himself? In this case is it better to lie?
- Dylan's relationship with his father is coloured by a failure of trust – to look after the son he fathered. It is complicated by Dylan's 'unshakeable' trust in his paternal grandparents, which challenges his view of his father. Will that change when he visits England? Students could imagine that scenario, through drama, writing in his 'voice', letters to his mother etc.
- Consider the opening scene of the book where Dylan is approached by one of Kirsty's neighbours who thinks he is loitering suspiciously (p. 3). Is she right to be suspicious? How does this foreshadow events to come?

## Assessment

Discussion and debate on the issues raised by this focus are relevant forms of 'informal' assessment for a book such as this. Students should be encouraged to refer to the text to support their views.

The value of talking through feelings and views, expressing opinions and listening to the views of others should not be underestimated.

### Focus: Title

Consider the significance of the title. Often titles seem loosely connected to the content of the story, but not in this case.

- Have students talk about this significance and multiple interpretations of the phrase '*Kill the Possum*' after reading the book, and hunt for specific references to the possum throughout the book, such as when Dylan first hears it in the ceiling (p35, 122, 150-1), Dylan kills the possum and lies about it to his mother (p187, 188).
- Related are the chapter headings, which underline the ambiguity of the novel and suggest foreshadowing of events. The references to the different Sundays are particularly poignant. What does this day usually mean for various families? Consider how this contributes to the tension of the novel.
- There are also lots of references to killing. For instance on page 60 Kirsty says '*I'll kill him if he touches her [Melanie]*' and again on page 85. What happens at the end? Does Kirsty kill Cartwright? Does he really kill himself? Is there any other option offered by the facts you have as reader?

### Focus: Moral questions

- Is the killing of one person to save others justified in any circumstances? For example, Dylan's conversation with himself (p178-179) and again on (p190), '*Evil shouldn't triumph*'. Why doesn't Dylan see that what he is planning is evil too?

#### Moral ambiguities

- Tim feels disempowered and seeks to deflect his powerlessness through self harm.
- Kirsty refuses to let Cartwright's abuse control her life and seeks to be positive and yet she is the one most severely 'punished'.

- We would like to feel that doing the right thing for others will lead to good outcomes. Is this case for Mrs Beal?

## Assessment

Recreate a Jerry Springer Show around the idea –

- 'I only wanted to kill to save my best friend, so I'm still the good guy' or
- 'He was evil so he needed to die, at least I had the guts to do it' or
- 'My family is more dysfunctional than your family but at least I did something about it'

Or make up your own theme for the show with reference to the book.

This could be followed by a peer assessment of the activity:

- What three new things about *Kill the Possum* have you learnt from viewing this performance?
- Identify an aspect you feel could have been done better.
- Identify one aspect of the performance that connected with your response to/ideas about the text.
- What question would you have asked?

## Related reading

*The Hanged Man* by Francesca Lia Block  
*I was a Teenage Fairy* by Francesca Lia Block  
*When She Hollers* by Cynthia Voigt  
*Killing Aurora* by Helen Barnes  
*The Book of Everything* by Guus Kuijer  
*Touching Earth Lightly* by Margo Lanagan  
*The Killing of Mudeye* by Celeste Walters  
*Song of an Innocent Bystander* by Ian Bone  
*Monster Man* by Glynn Parry  
*The Enemy you Killed* by Peter McFarlane  
*All my Dangerous Friends* by Sonya Hartnett  
*Raw* by Scott Monk  
*Doppelganger* by Michael Parker  
*Shadows in the Mirror* by Cameron Nunn  
*Woolvs in the Sitee* by Margaret Wild & Anne Spudvilas