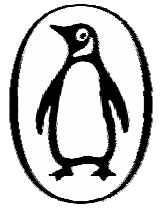


Teachers' notes
Written by Jean Yates



THE LAST OF THE BRAVES

By Archimede Fusillo

PLOT SUMMARY

Alex is a talented artist, a skill nurtured and fostered by his mother who passed on to him not only her talent, but her obsession with the hot-headed seventeenth-century painter, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. But, just like his mother, Alex is suffering for his art. As his mother lies dying in hospital, Alex is forced to confront his fears and question whether his inherited artistic ability is in fact a gift or a curse.

Throughout his life, Alex's mother, Teresa, has inspired him to be the great artist. She begins to live vicariously through her son, determined he will receive the recognition and achievement that were denied her. Her unwavering drive, determination and selfishness instil a great passion in her son, but at enormous cost. Shut off from her obsessive focus, her husband and older son Eric leave, causing an enormous and seemingly irreparable rift in the family. And, ultimately, her stubbornness and selfishness cause her to refuse life-saving treatment, forcing her family to cope with a long and harrowing illness and the inevitability of her death.

Teresa's migrant Italian parents refuse to accept the loss of their daughter and her father in particular is prepared to do anything to save his daughter's life, including dying in her place. His unwavering Catholic faith and belief in the old Italian ways, provide him with the strength to cope with the situation, but distance him from his family.

Unable to face the idea of his mother's death, Alex calls into question many aspects of his own life. His shared love of art now seems a burden that he can no longer bare and he resents his mother for forcing it upon him. When Teresa presents him with her legacy, a biography of the great Caravaggio, Alex finally begins to understand his mother, but each new revelation increases his frustration and distress.

Angered by his family - his mother's illness, his father and brother's abandonment and his grandfather and uncle's refusal to accept his love for Cesare - Alex grows increasingly unable to cope with the conflicting forces in his life. But, like his idol Caravaggio, when his artistic ability is called into question and his work ridiculed, Alex becomes increasingly disturbed and irrational in his



behaviour until ultimately, he embarks upon a path of destruction that can only have devastating consequences.

This novel has all the elements of a tragedy, made more poignant by Alex's undoubted talent and the agony he experiences as a result of circumstances beyond his control. It brings into question a number of issues regarding notions of identity and pressures faced by adolescents.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Consider the cover of the novel.

- What sort of images have been used? What colours have been selected? What predictions can you make about the content, character or mood of the story based on the cover? What sort of people usually use this style of illustration?

In answering this question, you will have drawn upon stereotypes.

- What is the danger of stereotypes? What impact can they have upon a person's life?

Given that the novel draws heavily upon the life and works of the artist Caravaggio, the publisher could have chosen to use one of his works as the cover.

- How would this have changed your reaction to the novel? Would you have picked it up to read?

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

Literary Devices

- Art / Visual Literacy
- Using History as the Basis for a Novel
- Gaps and Silences
- Creating Tension

Themes

- Family
- Death
- Migrants
- Religious Faith
- Selfishness
- Sexuality
- Being True to Yourself

- Mental Illness

CHARACTERS

Alessandro (Alex)

Like his mother before him, Alex is a talented artist and has been raised on his mother's stories of the great Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. His mother clearly poured a lot of energy into Alex and wanted him to be a great artist, even to the point of living vicariously through him after deciding that her own life was a failure. When his parents' marriage ended in divorce he stayed with his mother and she clearly turned him against his father. Alex is suffering from the fear of his mother's inevitable death. He has clearly been traumatised by the long debilitating illness and is torn between his love for his mother and his anger at her refusal to accept treatment, an action which he sees as selfish and needless.

Alex's pain leads to mental instability and he hits out at all of those around him, especially those he loves. He is in love with Cesare, a young boy from school. Whilst his mother accepts this relationship it greatly upsets his old-fashioned grandfather who cannot accept a homosexual relationship. It also leads to inevitable bullying at school.

His behaviour grows to mirror that of his mother's idol, Caravaggio, to the extent that he engages in wild, uncontrollable rampages. Unfortunately it takes the death of his beloved Ces to help him come to his senses.

Enrico (Eric)

Although Alex hates his older brother Eric, he has done nothing to deserve this. Like his brother he was caught up in his parents divorce, but chose to follow his father to Queensland where he has made a success of his life. In spite of not actually being there to witness his mother's illness and decline, he has clearly suffered from it as well – and from the whole family situation. Even when he is unwittingly involved in his brother's fight and severely beaten as a result, he remains loyal to Alex and supportive of him and their mother.

Nonno Tino

Nonno Tino is an old-world Italian grandfather who clings to his religion and his old village ways. Like many patriarchs, Nonno suffers for the mistakes of all his family members. He is an old man caught in a new generation. Divorce and homosexuality are abhorrent to him and alien to his own belief system. Yet, whilst he is proud and unyielding in his attitudes and values, he clearly loves all members of his family and would do anything to protect them. He would even gladly give his own life to save that of his daughter, in spite of the great amount of hurt she has inflicted on him.

Nonna Rita

Like most Italian matriarchs, Nonna Rita says little, but it is she who binds the family together. Her love for all her family is palpable and we feel her hurt at their treatment of each other and the family fighting. Like her husband, she is forced to cope with situations beyond her control or understanding. Yet she is always there to tend to the wounds or offer a soothing word or comforting meal.

Zio Tony

As Teresa's brother, Tony has always been made to feel inferior. Whilst he certainly doesn't have the perfect life – as illustrated by his stint in jail, his superficial relationships and his lack of steady work – he appears to be more comfortable in his own skin than his more outwardly successful sister. He has a very practical and honest outlook on life and refuses to change his opinions towards his sister and his actions simply because she is dying. His honesty and lack of hypocrisy are refreshing and contrast markedly with the rest of his family. He is ultimately, the only one who manages to live up to Teresa's adage to always paint the truth. As a very manly man, Tony would never condone homosexuality himself, yet he is surprisingly accepting of Alex's relationship with Ces, in spite of his teasing.

Cesare (Ces)

Ces is a true friend to Alex and remains extremely loyal and supportive. He is concerned about Alex but is unable to stop his madness and his anger. Ces is unwittingly drawn into Alex's situations and pays the ultimate price for his love. Like Alex, he too is affected by death and has his own demons to face. Yet he remains calm and rational. Alex is clearly fond of him and is prepared to use his artistic talent to help Ces raise the money for his beloved motorbike, but he is as selfish as Ces is selfless.

Teresa

'Artists have to be selfish, after all. Isn't that what their mum repeatedly drummed into him? And great artists have to be the most selfish of all. Everything for their art. Life. Death. Love.

It had to be all or....

Nothing.

When his mum looked in the mirror she saw failure. She had said as much. The thought made Alex want to puke.' (p53)

Teresa has achieved her lifelong ambition to become a great artist – in the sense that she is selfishly and single-mindedly dedicated to her art. Her obsession with her art has ultimately been her downfall, causing her to destroy all the relationships in her life – including her opinion of herself. She is hollow and emaciated – both by her disease and by the sense of failure that is eating her alive. Her determination and single mindedness have greatly impacted upon her son. Ironically, their shared talent and love of art are what forces them apart. Alex desperately wants and needs his mother to focus on him and not her art before

she dies. *'You can't expect me to follow you. I'm not your apprentice. I'm your son!'* (p180)

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

(i) WRITING TECHNIQUES

ART / VISUAL LITERACY

'Art is life and life is art. But only an artist can understand the cost of that knowledge. An artist has to be selfish and disregard all else for the sake of art.... There is no art left in my mum and so she's dying.... That's what's going on in my life, Lauren. My mum is dying from her art.' (p165)

- Consider the significance of this statement with regard to this novel. In what way is Teresa dying from her art?

ACTIVITIES

Throughout the novel, the author makes constant references to paintings and the images contained in them.

- Discuss the power of visual images. How can a picture convey mood or emotion?

Consider the colour wheel.

- What colours represent happiness, anger, death, warmth, cold etc? Have students divide a page into 4 sections. Label each section with a different feeling or emotion: happiness, sadness, relaxation, anger, warmth, coldness etc (selected by either the teacher or the individual students). In each quadrant, use the appropriate colours and shapes or images to depict the chosen mood.

Collect a range of illustrations (a variety of styles) and have students assign descriptive words to each image.

Make a list of key words – themes, emotions or issues that you think sum up the novel. Find a series of visual images that reflect these words. Arrange them in order so that they trace the emotions in the novel as they occur. (The images should increase in intensity, confusion, distress and impact, just as Alex's mood in the novel does).

Find copies of the Carravagio works mentioned in this novel:

- Judith beheading Holofernes
- Bacchus
- St Peter nailed to the cross
- Medusa
- The Fortune Teller

- David with the head of Goliath
- The Madonna

Explain how each piece (or the story behind each piece) is reflected in the novel.

Select one piece of artwork (from any artist, not necessarily a Carravaggio) that you think sums up the mood or the message in this novel and be prepared to explain or justify your choice.

USING HISTORY AS THE BASIS FOR A NOVEL

- What can we learn by studying historic figures or events? Is it good to have a 'famous' role model? Can history repeat itself?

As you read Teresa's book about Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, make a note of any difficulties or issues faced by the artist, presented in each chapter.

- Why do you think Teresa was so desperate for Alex to read her book?
- What messages are there in it that she would want him to know before she dies?
- Why do you think she chose to teach him these messages through the story of Caravaggio rather than in her own voice?

Hold a class discussion on the idea of writing a modern piece of fiction that stems from an historic event or figure.

- What are the advantages in doing this?

Ask students to think of any novels (or films) that they have read or seen that have used this technique.

- What did they like or dislike about these texts?

ACTIVITIES

Research Michelangelo Merisi da Carravaggio.

- What aspects of his life are reflected in the characters of Teresa and Alex?

Choose another famous cultural figure (an artist, writer, musician etc) and research his or her life. Write your own narrative that mirrors the themes or issues experienced during his or her lifetime, but that changes the characters and the socio-cultural setting of the story (i.e. is a piece of fiction rather than a retelling of this person's story).

GAPS AND SILENCES

This novel lends itself extremely well to an examination of the notion of gaps and silences. (Gaps are the bits of information that are not provided within the text itself that we as readers fill in for ourselves based on our own prior knowledge, life experiences and/or from other evidence in the text. Silences occur when

certain people or voices are 'silenced' in the text and are therefore not able to provide their own story or interpretation).

ACTIVITY

We hear this story almost entirely through Alex's eyes.

Select a marginalised (minor) character from the novel and consider what his or her story might be. In character, present a personal reflection that explains your behaviours, attitudes and motivations.

- What are the gaps in this character's story and how do you think they can best be filled (in-keeping with the story itself).

CREATING TENSION

One of the strengths with this novel is the power and intensity of the conflict that runs throughout the whole story. The reader would expect the opening scene of an Italian family sitting around the dinner table to display warmth, love and nurturing. This gives the tension that is there from the very first words added impact. Yet the writer refrains from making the story melodramatic.

Discuss the devices that have been used to create tension throughout the novel.

- Have students select the passage that they regard as being the most effective. Examine word choices and the escalation of emotions.
- Have students write their own scene that creates a similar level of tension.

ACTIVITY

Give each student a sheet of A3 paper and have them fold it in half. On the front cover, ask them to draw a moment from the novel that they thought was very important (e.g. essential to the plot/ characters/ theme). On the inside they briefly explain the scene they have drawn in words. On the next page, explain why they chose that particular moment and why it was important.

- Now re-write the scene from the perspective of one of the other characters involved.
- Re-arrange the drawn scenes around the room according to the order in which they occur within the novel. (With luck, almost every scene in the novel will have been drawn and you will have a sequential visual display of the novel).

(ii) THEMES

FAMILY

This novel makes a number of statements about family and the influence it can have on our lives.

Zio Tony is clearly jealous of his sister. She was the success story in the family. The irony is that her 'success' distanced her from everyone around her, even her family. Ultimately her art and her selfishness killed her. Tony, for all his ignorance and lack of ability, has managed to earn a living and maintain some sort of relationships. Above all, he is comfortable in his own skin. Perhaps, after all, his lack of ability has afforded him the better life.

- In what ways do you think his life has been affected by his sister?

Alex is jealous of his older brother Eric. He is resentful of the fact that Eric hasn't been around the whole time their mother has been ill and they were nursing her at home. Now that she has been put into a home, he has returned like the prodigal son. (p3)

- Make a list of the differences between Alex and Eric.
- What do you think caused the great tension between the two brothers?

Alex's grandparents have been hurt by many of the things that his mother, Teresa has done, yet they would still give anything to keep their daughter alive.

- Have a class discussion about the sacrifices that you have made or would make for members of your family.

'The template of their world is always resting over the fabric of my life, Alex.'
(p38)

- In what ways do her parents' lives influence Teresa's?

'Tendrils of talent linking them together, that's how his mum had described their shared ability to draw and sketch...Alex sometimes felt, like now, that he was being choked by the tendrils of talent that linked him and his mum.' (p39)

'I stopped knowing her when she threw your dad out of her life...And Eric was smart enough to follow before she got to him as well.But you, Al, you're trapped. You and my parents both. Her passion for your freedom. Go figure!'
(p126)

- How is Alex's life influenced or determined by his mother?
- Alex clearly has a strong bond with his mother, particularly because of his painting. Is their's, however, a healthy relationship?
- What did his mum expect of Alex but not of Eric? (p130)
- What sort of relationship do you think Eric had with his mother? Do you think this was fair?

When Ces finally reads Alex his letter from his father, Alex remembers what his father was really like. (Pp182-185)

- What sort of relationship did he have with his father? How did the relationship change?
- Who is to blame for the change?

We all need family.

- What positives does a family provide?
- What can be the negative aspects of being part of a family? (Particularly for a culture such as the Italians have, in which family is so important).
- In Teresa's book, Caravaggio refers to *'the burden of family'*. Is this an appropriate description?

ACTIVITIES

Stage a class discussion about families.

- How does your position in the family affect your life? Is it best to be the eldest, middle or youngest child? Why?

Consider the benefits and disadvantages of family. Create a graphic organiser that clearly lists the positives and negatives. The positives may include things such as: provide support, provide a sense of belonging or identity, nurturing etc, whilst the negatives could include ideas such as suffocating, restrict individuality, place pressure on children etc.

Ask the students to respond on a personal level and a societal level to the question "Why is family important?" Brainstorm a number of responses under the headings in a five minute time limit. Then share the responses one at a time. (The discussion should draw out the ideas that family is important because it offers comfort, refuge, support, teaches personal and social values etc)

DEATH

Consider the different ways in which each character copes with the inevitability of death.

- Nonno wants to do everything he can to stop it from happening.
- Nonna pretends she is going to get better.
- Tony refuses to change his opinion of his sister simply because she is dying. He is the realist in the family: *'You talk about me being cruel. What about you and Dad? Ain't it cruel to keep telling yourselves Teresa is coming home when she ain't?'* (p5)
- Alex is angry and hits out at others: *'How do you just sit there by your daughter's bed just waiting for her to die? She could have had a transplant years ago if she hadn't been so stubborn, and now it's too late.'* (p71)
- Ces and his family quietly grieve over the death of his sister's baby.

Is there a 'correct' way to cope with death?

'Don't you think that if there had been anything I could have done for Mum I would have done it?' Eric said. *'You think it was easy for me being in Queensland and not knowing first hand what was going on with Mum? I had to wait for you people down here to phone or....'* (p76)

'You're not the only one hurting over mum, Alex...' (p77)

'You're full of bravado shit, Alex,' Eric whispered, his nostrils flared. 'You know what I think? I think you're more scared than hurting. You're scared about what'll happen once Mum does die.'

'Fear, Eric. Fear. And not just the fear of dying. No. Fear of living. Of being left behind...I'm not so much scared about what's going to happen once Mum's dead, Eric. Not as much as I am about what's happening while she's still alive.' (p77)

- As a reader, do your sympathies lie with Alex or Eric?
- Did one son suffer more than the other as a result of Teresa's illness?
- Why is Alex more scared about what is happening now than about what will happen after Teresa's death?

'My Nonno chooses to believe mum will be in a better place when she dies because all her suffering will be over...Hope and fear, Ces. Hope and fear. They sort of feed off each other don't you reckon.' (p197)

- In what way does this statement apply to this book? Do you think it is true for life?

How does Ces's death help to unite Alex and his family?

ACTIVITIES

Imagine that the deaths of Ces and Teresa provide some sort of catharsis for Alex and he decides to reunite with his father.

Either:

In the character of Alex, write a letter to your father explaining your behaviour and your feelings.

OR

Write the dialogue that may take place between Alex and his father when they are finally reconciled.

Write the eulogy that Alex may have delivered at Teresa's funeral.

- What aspects of her life would he have highlighted?

Now write the eulogy that Tony or Eric would have delivered.

- How would this be different?

MIGRANTS

Consider the following statements from the novel:

'Your Nonno is an old fashioned man, Alex,' his mum began. 'Even all these years after leaving his tiny mountain village behind he's basically the same man he was back then.' (p7)

'...this is Australia after all, and we don't go in for carrying statues round and round a church just because they do it in some little Italian country village.' (p13)

'In Italy the original statue is taken up into the mountain chapel for summer and down into the village church for winter...It's our way of thanking Her for Her mercies. And it's not my village, Alex. I was born here, in Australia, remember?' 'Not your village,' Alex observed, 'but "our way". Seems a bit hypocritical don't you think?' (p38)

- What old traditions do Alex's grandparents cling to? How have their attitudes been shaped by their migrant status?
- Why do so many migrants maintain such strong connections to their old ways and customs?
- How do the subsequent generations feel about these traditions?
- Many migrants find when they return 'home' for holidays that those who stayed behind have moved away from the old customs far more than those who left. Why might this be the case?

RELIGIOUS FAITH

- Why does Nonno insist that Alex take part in the procession of the Madonna and Child? (p11)

Like many Italian immigrants, Nonno is staunchly Catholic.

- How do his religious beliefs affect his attitudes to life and death and influence the way he copes with his daughter's illness.

SELFISHNESS

'She refused the early transplants because she was shit scared of dying under the knife, or from the organs being rejected. And she's allowed rejection to literally kill her, Ces. Her selfishness has killed her.' (p191)

- In what ways is Teresa selfish?

'There is more to you than merely your mother's talent. There is also that selfish desire to stand apart from the rest of us...'

'Why do you feel the need to hurt us so much, Alessandro?... Your mother has already taken so much away from us. From you.' (p86)

- In what ways is Alex's behaviour selfish?

- Do you agree with the statement that a great artist needs to be selfish?
- What other professions need this sort of determination and single-mindedness?

SEXUALITY

Alex believes that he is in love with Ces, and his apparent homosexuality brings him into conflict with his nonno and his Zio Tony, as well as himself.

Questioning your sexuality is certainly a key issue for many adolescent boys and failure to adhere to social norms can cause alienation and damaged self esteem.

- What difficulties or reactions do homosexual boys tend to face? Why do you think others often react to them in this way?
- Do you think that Alex is really homosexual, or is this part of his confusion, his strong need to love someone to fill a void left by his family and to give him a sense of identity and belonging?
- In what ways does his sexuality increase his alienation and condemnation?
- How is Alex's relationship with Ces different from that he has with his family?
- What aspects of Alex's character are revealed through his relationship with Ces?

BEING TRUE TO YOURSELF

Being honest and painting the truth are strong themes throughout this novel. Yet neither Alex nor his mother ever managed to achieve this ambition, much to their detriment:

'His mum had given them exactly what they wanted, a sanitised version of the 'real' event... Alex could fully see now why his mum hated the painting so much. It was all a lie.... She hadn't been able to paint Eric, let alone her own parents, exactly as they were. She had glamorised them.' (p15)

When Alex's mum insists he paint her portrait his friend Ces suggests that he paint it from a photo. But Alex and his mother believe in the words of Caravaggio:

'From life as much as possible, Ces, the Caravaggio way.' (p29)

'From life. That was how it was supposed to be done. Not from memory. Or at least not until there was absolutely no alternative.' (p30)

Teresa taught her son: *'Paint the truth, Alex. Always paint the truth...Never compromise, Alex.'* (p 88)

- Do artists ever really manage to paint the truth?

- Is art uncompromising or is it always a sanitised view of the world?
- Is it in fact possible to have complete truth in art?
- Did Teresa adhere to this philosophy herself?
- In what ways did her failure to reflect the truth in both her life and her art cause her downfall (and that of her son)?

Alex's art teacher tells him to: *'Dare to be yourself, artistically at least, Alex.'* (p94)

- Why does Alex fail to be himself artistically? Why does he spend so much of his time painting *'Caravaggio rip-offs'*.

'Why did everything have to be reduced to a work of art in his mum's reckoning with the world?' (p98)

- How do Teresa's obsession with art and her inability to see beyond art affect every aspect of her life?
- What does Alex want from his mother?

When Alex writes his letter to his mother (pp 208-210) what conclusions has he reached and what demons has he managed to confront?

MENTAL ILLNESS

As the novel progresses, so too does Alex's decline into mental illness. By the climax he is totally emotional and irrational, causing him to engage in destructive behaviours and uncontrollable rages.

'...I'm scared too. Of my mum dying...Of pushing everyone out of my life, Ces included...It's a carrion thing to be alone. It makes you putrid and worthless.' (p173)

'Do you know what my nonno keeps telling me almost every day when I shave him?' he asked. 'He tells me that we're all dying along with my mother. All of us, even my dad, in his way. He tells me he hopes he might die in my mum's place, but he fears he won't.

But he's wrong, Ces,' Alex added with cold calm. 'He's wrong. We're not all dying along with his daughter. Not all of us. It's not what my mum wants. It's what Nonno Tino wants. It's his guilt...not mine...I've got nothing to be guilty about, Ces.' (pp 190-191)

- What causes Alex's mental decline?

'They were all jealous of him. Jealous of his mum too. Zio Tony. His nonni too. Even his dad, and Eric. But especially Eric. They were jealous of him, his art, his skill.' (p130)

- Alex, Teresa and even Caravaggio all feel this way. Do you agree that others were jealous of them? Why might they have felt this way? What does this reveal about their characters?

ACTIVITIES

Go back to your summaries of Caravaggio's story. Make a list of any parallels you can find between the lives of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio and Alex.

For example:

- when Caravaggio's brother came to Rome he refused to look him in the eye. He had no need for the burden of family. (p42)
- he refuses to conform and feels that those who don't appreciate his art are morons who need to be taught a lesson.
- Caravaggio grows increasingly violent and anti-social

Trace the progression of Alex's increasing madness:

- smashes the boy's skateboard when he objects to the painting of the medusa (p67)
- slaps his nonno (p85)
- rips up his painting at school (p94)
- fight in the schoolyard (p108)
- paints Bacchus on Tarquino's door (p116)
- throws clock at Zio Tony (p119)
- steals Tony's car (p131)
- fight at Tarquino's (pp134-138)
- steals the painting from the church (p147)
- shoplifting (pp162-167)
- painting the girl's portrait (pp172-173)
- confronting Sammon (pp213-216)

Represent Alex's decline in a visual or graphic organiser (e.g. a time chart, a graph etc).

- Discuss with students the most effective means of representing the information.

(iii) FOR DISCUSSION

- How much of our behaviour is beyond our control?
- How can parental love and nurturing actually be harmful to a child?
- What issues or concerns do teens face that are most likely to cause them mental anguish and illness?
- What do you think are the over-riding messages in this novel?
- What is the significance of the title? Do you think it is appropriate for this book? What title might you have chosen instead?



RELATED READINGS

- *Goodbye Jamie Boyd* by Elizabeth Fensham
- *Kill the Possum* by James Moloney
- *The Nest* by Paul Jennings
- *Solo* by Alyssa Brugman
- *Somebody's Crying* by Maureen McCarthy

LAST OF THE BRAVES

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