



Teachers' Notes  
Written by Sam Bryant

# *Swerve*

## By Phillip Gwynne

### **Synopsis**

Hugh Twycross's life is all mapped out for him. He is one of the finest young musicians in the country and he is destined to gain entry to the prestigious Conservatorium – all he has to do is make the audition. Nevertheless, Hugh's life takes a change of direction after meeting Poppy, a grandfather he never knew he had. Their shared passion for muscle cars and all things Holden leads Hugh to agree to drive Poppy to Ayers Rock in a 1969 Holden HT Monaro GTS 350 V8. This road trip threatens to derail his audition with the Conservatorium and meets with the disapproval and disbelief of his parents. Nevertheless, the ensuing road trip exposes Hugh to people, places, societies and experiences that he never knew existed. Will this be a temporary or permanent swerve from Hugh's seemingly preordained path? Phillip Gwynne's *Swerve* is a thrilling and touching rite of passage story that is sure to capture readers' imaginations.

### **Before Reading**

Look at the front cover.

- What do you think is the significance of the title, *Swerve*? How do you think it will relate to the characters and events of the text?
- What do you think will be the major setting (time, place) of the text? What makes you think this?

- What do you think is the significance of the car on the front cover? What do you think will be the subject matter of the novel?
- Do you think the main character of the novel will be male or female? Why do you think this? How old do you think the main character will be? What other things can you predict about the main character?

## MAIN CHARACTERS

### Hugh 'Brockie' Twycross

- What are some of Hugh's interests or behaviours that could classify him as a 'nerd'? How do some of his interests go against stereotypical nerdy behaviour?
- Hugh's love of cars is portrayed like a force of nature. Poppy's 1969 Holden HT Monaro GTS 350 V8 is described as:

*Yellow with black stripes, it looked like a tiger out of its cage. It looked magnificent. It looked carnivorous. It looked ready to roar.* (pp16-17)

Why do you think Gwynne has chosen to describe Hugh's love of cars in this way? Can you find any other passages describing how Hugh feels when he is driving or looking at cars? How do these passages convey Hugh's love of muscle cars?

- What does Hugh think about Poppy when he first meets her? How does Hugh's relationship with Poppy change as the novel progresses?
- What are the common interests that Hugh and Poppy share? Is it simply coincidence that they both love cars and are both 'Holden' or do their family ties mean that Hugh was always destined to have 'a strong and passionate affection' (p.6) for cars?
- How does Hugh's road trip with Poppy continually confront him with the differences between his privileged upbringing and some of the harsh realities of the outside world? What are some of the events in the novel that cause Hugh to re-evaluate some of his previous opinions? (See THEMES – Coming of Age)
- How do you think Hugh 'Brockie' Twycross has changed by the end of the novel? What parts of the old Hugh will be discarded and what parts of the new 'Brockie' will he retain? Do you get the impression that some of these

changes are only the beginning of an extended period of change and re-evaluation for Hugh? If so, why?

- Why does Hugh seem to leave behind his relationship with Bella by refusing to take her call before going into the audition? Do you think he realises that while some people and things are exciting and intoxicating, sometimes they are likely to cause nothing but trouble?
- How do the events of Hugh's audition at the Conservatorium suggest that his future is likely to be a blend of 'private schoolboy' Hugh and 'Brockie' Hugh'?

### Poppy

- What is Hugh's initial impression of Poppy? How does the initial description of Poppy help to create this impression for readers? See pp.9 - 12.
- How do Poppy's methods of instruction differ from those of Hugh's parents and the Professor? How does he empower Hugh in a way that Hugh's parents never would? Nevertheless, do some of these methods sometimes overstep the mark and place Hugh in unnecessary danger or lead him down the wrong path?
- How does Poppy's language differ from Hugh's and that of his family, friends and teachers? Why is Hugh attracted to and yet uncomfortable with some of Poppy's more colourful descriptions?
- 'Screw *that*' is one of Poppy's oft-repeated phrases. In what way is he the voice of unrestrained rebellion? How does his rebellious nature change Hugh? How might Poppy be simply unleashing elements of Hugh's personality that have always there, but have remained hidden?
- Do you think Poppy realises that some of his rebellion is the result of failing to accept some of his most important responsibilities? Does he ever try to convey this understanding to Hugh? See in particular:
  - the conversation between Hugh and Poppy (pp 50-52)
  - Poppy's revelation (pp150-151)
  - Poppy's admission to Hugh about walking out on his family (pp.184-188)
- Overall, has Poppy been a negative or positive influence on Hugh? Provide reasons and evidence for your answer.

## **'Bella'**

- How does Hugh's initial inability to comprehend Bella's character (pp.94-95) continue throughout the novel?
- How is Bella a symbol of new and expanding horizons for Hugh?  
Consider:
  - His shower with Bella (pp.156-158)
  - Seeing Bella in the back of the station wagon (p.166)
  - Heartbreak (p.171)
  - 'Like a Virgin' (pp.219-220)
- How does Bella also represent the realm of fascination and danger for Hugh?  
Consider:
  - Hugh wanting to take off after Bella (pp.140-141)
  - the party at the mine (pp.160-168)
  - chasing after the Bodybuilder to rescue Bella (pp.203-214)
  - driving Bella to Alice Springs (pp.214-215)
- Why does Bella continually lie? Does she lie to protect herself or is she deceiving herself by not facing up to reality?
- Do you believe Bella when she tells Hugh that she's been selling 'cards' not drugs?
- In what way is Bella's upbringing the antithesis of Hugh's childhood?
- Can Hugh be sure about any of the details of Bella's life? Why does he not chase after her at the end of the novel? Do you think that this is a wise decision? Why or why not?
- The text message that Hugh receives at the end of the novel reads *"it's a hot choc xm"* (p.227). Who is Hugh going to meet? (Montana) What does Hugh's decision to meet this person reveal to you about how he has changed as a result of his experiences on the road? Do you think his parents would approve of him going to meet this person? Why or why not?

## MINOR CHARACTERS

### Hugh's Parents

- *'My father – in his suit – smiles at me. My mother in her suit –smiles at me'* (p.1). How does Hugh portray his parents as stuffy and overbearing?
- How would you describe Hugh's relationship with his parents? What evidence can you find from the text to support your viewpoint?
- *"That is really some accomplishment, Hugh."*

Why is Hugh surprised at his mother's apparent congratulations for being able to drive from Sydney to Uluru? Do you think her congratulations are sincere? Why is he so surprised at her swearing and hanging up on him? Is there a suggestion here that Hugh's parents aren't as stuffy and conservative as he thinks they are?

### Harriet 'Moreton' Twycross (Hugh's Sister)

- Apart from being brother and sister, what other bonds do Harriet and Hugh share? What are the hints that *'Moreton'* also feels restricted by her parents?

### Hugh's mates (Zhang Zhong and Sandipan Chandrasakan)

- What do Zhang and Sandipan's nicknames reveal about their characters?
- How is Hugh similar, but different to his 'nerdy' mates?

## THEMES

### Coming of Age/Rite of Passage

- What things does Hugh's road trip with Poppy teach him that his parents probably would have never been able to? What does he learn in each of the following episodes?
  - staying in the caravan park in the chapter "Bathurst" (pp.29-36)
  - "Mount Panorama" (pp 38-45)
  - picking up Les the hitchhiker (pp 46-48)
  - staying at the Million Star Hotel (pp.59-66)
  - Poppy's visit to hospital (p66-75, pp 79-81)
  - meeting with Montana (pp. 75-78)
  - the blown clutch (p.85-86)
  - busking in Broken Hill (pp.92-97)

- the first car chase with the Bodybuilder (pp.112-113)
  - sharing a sleeping bag with Bella (p.115-116)
  - learning about Poppy's 'Jimmy Dancer' (pp. 142-143)
  - stopping at the roadside stop just past Wiraminna Station (pp.145-146)
  - witnessing Poppy's encounter with Bob (p.147-148)
  - having a shower with Bella (pp.156-158)
  - surviving the encounter with the Bodybuilder (pp.171-175)
  - his phone conversation with his mother (pp.181-183)
  - his conversation with Poppy in the diner and in the car on the Lasseter Highway (pp.184-190)
  - the visit to Uluru (p. 193-194)
  - phoning Dr Kline (pp.200-201)
- *'Dude you're living the dream.'* (p.121) Is Hugh living every teenage boy's dream? Why or why not?
  - Does the novel *Swerve* suggest that we sometimes need to follow our heart and take some risks in order to find out who we really are? Provide reasons and evidence for your answer.
  - Does the novel suggest that as life progresses individuals will continually have to ask questions of themselves in order to work out who they are?

### **Shaping Your Own Destiny**

- *'I had this feeling that I was making a horrendous mistake and now was the time to pull out'* (p.21)
- Is Hugh responsible for changing the course of his life-path or is it Poppy? Are they both partly responsible? What are some of the events in the novel where Hugh takes matters into his own hands? Is there a suggestion that Hugh's interests and destiny will forever be linked to his grandfather as a result of their family ties?
- Do you think that *Swerve* is suggesting that at some point in our lives we must follow our hearts and take responsibility for shaping our own destiny?
  - What do you think about the ending of the novel? Has Hugh abandoned the cello forever? Is there any hint that he might yet still be accepted into the Conservatorium? What do you think the future holds for Hugh? Will his life turn out for the better or worse as a result of his road trip with Poppy? Who is he going to meet?

- How does the title of the novel help to develop the theme of 'Shaping Your Own Destiny'? In what way can a swerve be dangerous? In what way can it represent a change for the better? Is a swerve a permanent change of direction?
- In what way does Poppy's decision that he wants to live reflect a desire to shape his own destiny?

### **Family**

- In what ways is Hugh's family highly supportive of him? In what ways do his parents only want the best for him? Is Hugh typical of many teenagers?
- In what ways does Hugh feel restricted by what he believes are his overly conservative parents? Do you think he is justified in feeling restricted by his parents' wishes? Why or why not?
- How does the novel explore the idea that being a member of a family comes with great responsibility?
- At what point should somebody be able to put their own needs ahead of that of his or her family? Should anyone ever be allowed to do this?
- How does the novel explore that family closeness can bring great joy and support, but family betrayal can result in some of the greatest pain and suffering?
- How does Swerve demonstrate that we are linked by our family ties when we might not even know that we are related to someone?
- How important is it to know about your family's past? How important is it for Hugh to find out about the existence of Poppy and his family's past?

### **Friendship**

- How does Swerve demonstrate that we sometimes find friendship and friendly acts in the most unlikely of places?
- How does Swerve demonstrate the power of friendship to break down barriers that sometimes appear to exist between people?
- Hugh and Bella are different in so many ways. Why do they become friends? Do you think they remain friends at the end of the novel? Why or why not?

- What does Hugh's experience with Montana reveal about the nature of friendship?
- Does *Swerve* suggest that we all need friends to successfully make our way in the world? If so, how?

### Addiction

- Early on in the book Hugh says *'I was in total agreement with Mum and Dad on this: drug addiction is a weakness, the worst sort of weakness there is.'* (p.13)

Later on in novel he finds that his own grandfather has been – and maybe still is – an addict. Does Hugh's perception of drug addiction change as the novel progresses? How does he begin to see the human side of drug addiction rather than something on the margins of society?

- He also says *'I was starting to understand why people jumped out of aeroplanes, why they raced fast cars. I was starting to understand how people got addicted to adrenaline.'*

Is Hugh suggesting that he, too, may become an addict, an adrenaline addict? Is addiction something that is passed down through the genes? Does the novel suggest that in our own way, we are all susceptible to different forms of addiction?

### The Power of Landscape

- There are several instances in the book where the landscape seems to have a powerful effect on Hugh.

When he stays at the Million Star Hotel Hugh remarks *"It looked like the celestial designer had dipped a hand into the star bucket and wiped them across the sky."* (p.64)

Do you think Hugh has ever really paused to think about the world outside suburban Sydney or the luxurious places that he has stayed? How does the above description reveal that Hugh might be beginning to recognise the beauty of the nature and that the world is a far bigger and more dazzling place than he ever imagined?

Find other examples in *Swerve* where the landscape has had a definite effect on Hugh. What does he learn through his interaction with the landscape?



- How does Gwynne portray Uluru? Does it seem to more than just a large rock?

The ranger says of Uluru:

*Uluru is a place for water, for tucker, but most importantly it is a place for getting culture, for getting knowledge. The knowledge that you take with you out into the world. (p.194)*

Do you think that the tour group understands what the ranger is saying? What do you think that the ranger means by this? How do you think that the ranger thinks most people view Uluru?

Do you think Hugh understands what the ranger is saying? Why or why not? Will Hugh take knowledge with him out into the world after his trip to Uluru?

Hugh remarks after his visit to Uluru:

*We stopped at Yulara. It was a strange transition: from the primacy of the Rock, from uber-Uluru, to the resort. The air conditioned café we entered seemed so flimsy, so ephemeral. As for the air-conditioned tourists inside, we seemed even more flimsy, even more ephemeral. (p.194)*

What has Hugh learnt from his road trip and his visit to Uluru? What new perspectives does Hugh have regarding humanity's standing in relation to the natural world? Would Hugh have made this observation prior to going on his road trip with Poppy?

## **Euthanasia**

- Is Poppy right when he says '*It's a person's right to choose where and when they go.*'?
- Has Poppy explored all of the treatment options available to him to fight his cancer?
- Why, in the end, does Poppy change his mind? Why does he choose life over death? Why do you think that he might now believe that he has reasons to go on living? Who might have made him think this way?

## **Preconceived Ideas**

- What are preconceived ideas?
- How can preconceived ideas often be misleading? Can they ever be accurate?
- How do Hugh's experiences on the road trip challenge some of his preconceived ideas?
- What do you think Hugh has learnt about the nature of preconceived ideas by the end of his trip with Poppy and Bella?
- At the end of the novel Hugh receives a text message from the person he is going to meet. The text message is "*it's a hot choc xm*" (p.227). Who is Hugh going to meet? Has Hugh changed some of his preconceived ideas?

## **STRUCTURE**

- Why does Gwynne deliberately start *Swerve* almost at the end of the events of the novel with Hugh just about to go into the audition at the Conservatorium?
- What questions are raised in readers' minds after reading the first chapter?
- How does the opening chapter aim to create a sense of curiosity in readers?

## **WRITING STYLE**

### **Genre**

- In what ways can *Swerve* be classified as a 'road trip' story? What are some of the other 'road trip' books that you have read or movies that you have seen? What are the similarities between these stories and *Swerve*?
- In what ways can *Swerve* be classified as a 'coming of age' story? What are some of the other 'coming of age' books that you have read or movies that you have seen? What are the similarities between these stories and *Swerve*?

## Narrative Voice

- What is the narrative perspective of this novel? (First person, Hugh 'Brockie' Twycross) Why do you think Gwynne has chosen a first person narrative perspective for his novel?

## Language

- Hugh calls the examiners at the Conservatorium '*the Ancients*' (p.1). Why does he call them this? What are the connotations of the term '*the Ancients*'? Find other instances where Hugh deliberately labels groups of people, or gives individual characters nicknames, in order to convey his impression of their values, manners and appearance. What does this labelling or nicknaming reveal about Hugh? What does it reveal about those that he describes in these terms?
- How do Hugh's descriptions of characters' physical characteristics aim to create an initial impression of their personalities? How do these descriptions develop the idea that appearances can sometimes be deceiving? How do these descriptions sometimes confirm Hugh's initial impressions? How are these descriptions often humorous?

See in particular Hugh's observations of:

- the Professor's eyebrows (p.2)
  - the skanks (p.9)
  - scum on the street (p.9)
  - drug addicts (pp.13-16)
  - Alf, The Viking (p.30)
  - Roberto and Caetano (p.32)
  - Montana (pp.75-78)
  - the hospital security guards (pp.81-82)
  - the '*nasal-voiced three chord busker*' (p.96)
  - the Bodybuilder and the Pornstar (p.107)
  - the teenagers in Port Augusta (pp.130-131)
  - the two policemen (pp.138-140)
  - the hippies in the van at Uluru (pp.190-191)
- How does Hugh draw upon his influences, interests and knowledge to create humorous observations of the world? Does some of this humour arise out of the unique way that Hugh describes things that are new or foreign to him?

Some examples include:

- '*A couple of hours later, after we'd crested a slight rise, the clouds cracked open, the low flooding sun appeared, and*

*suddenly we were driving into a hundred-mile-wide plasma.'*  
(p.84)

- *'The Barrier Highway, as far as I could see, was the world's longest zoo.'* (p.103)
- *'My chest was the Large Hadron Collider, the world's biggest particle accelerator, my heart a lepton, and around it whizzed, faster and faster.'* (p.128)
- *'As in, "I'm so constipated I haven't passed a KFC for three days."'* (p.135)
- *'Homo vehiculus'* (p.144)

Find other examples of these humorous observations.

- How does Gwynne make use of repetition in the novel to convey the thoughts that weigh heavily on Hugh's mind?

See in particular Hugh's thoughts regarding:

- *'such a wonderful opportunity'* (p.2)
- *'I wondered'* (p.87)
- *'Three Perish in Outback Fiasco'* (pp.118-119, p.126)
- *'Dude you're living the dream.'* (p.121, 168)

- How do the Aboriginal ranger's words *'Uluru is not a place for dying'* (p.193) take on an eerily prophetic significance later in the novel?
- Hugh's sister writes fantasy novels. Are there places in the novel where Gwynne pokes fun at the often clichéd nature of fantasy writing?
- *"'Hey Brockie, thanks for saving me,' said Bella, her hand on my hand. 'It was nothing,' I said. But it wasn't nothing; it was straight out of Moreton's books, one of the more successful chapters: Bella the damsel in distress, me the gallant shining knight astride my noble steed slaying the fearsome dragon. And so on. Bella took her hand away, but I could still feel its imprint, its warmth, its pulse.'* (p.215)

In what ways have some of Hugh's experiences been surreal?

Nevertheless, how are he and readers reminded that these experiences are still scarily real?

## IDEAS FOR WRITING

### Creative, Imaginative and Personal Writing

1. The ending of the novel is left slightly unresolved.

- Has Hugh given up the cello for good?
- Will he go to the Conservatorium?
- Will he meet up with Bella? Where will he meet her?
- What happens to his relationship with Poppy?
- What happens to his relationship with his parents?

Write the next chapter of *Swerve* where you explore some or all of these questions.

2. Rewrite part of the novel from the following point of view/s:

- Poppy
- Bella
- Hugh's mother

3. Has there ever been a time when your life took an unexpected detour? Did you emerge from this time a changed person? Write about this time.

4. Can you remember a time where your preconceived ideas about something or someone were challenged? What was the result of your experience? Write about this time in your life.

5. How has your family influenced your interests and outlook on life? Write a personal exploration of how your family relationships have made you the person that you are today.

6. Are you a rebel? When is it appropriate to rebel? Write a persuasive essay or opinionative article discussing when it is and isn't appropriate to rebel and go against 'the system'.

7. Write a short story or personal piece where the narrator is moved or changed by their interactions with the natural landscape.

### Essay Topics

1. 'By the end of the novel *Swerve* Hugh Twycross is a completely changed person.' Discuss.
2. '*Swerve* is a novel of self-discovery.' Discuss.

3. In *Swerve* Hugh Twycross is defined by his relationships with others.' Discuss.
4. 'Poppy is entirely responsible for the events that befall Hugh Twycross in the novel *Swerve*.' Do you agree?
5. '*Swerve* suggests that life is what we make of it.' Discuss.
6. 'The novel *Swerve* explores the idea that appearances can sometimes be deceiving.' Discuss.
7. How does *Swerve* explore the idea that we are often influenced by the environment in which we live?