

Teachers' Notes
Written by Bronwyn Owen



CAMEL RIDER

By Prue Mason

Overview

For Adam, living with his pilot father and family in an expatriate compound in Abudai in the Arabian Gulf, life could not be easier. But when war breaks out, Adam finds himself alone and attempting to find his way back to the abandoned compound to save his dog, Tara, who has been left in the mad rush to escape across the boarder.

We also meet Walid, living a miserable life as a camel rider in a camp on the outskirts of Abudai. His father is dead and his mother works in Abudai, and he must win enough money racing camels to buy his freedom and return to his mother. By showing kindness to a camel due to foal he is responsible for her accidental death, and for this he is taken to a cave out in the desert, hobbled at hands and feet, and left to die by the cruel men who he was sold to.

Dazed and delirious from the desert heat, Adam has finished his water and is close to passing out when he comes across Walid, hoping at first that he might be saved, but then realising that Walid has been tied up and abandoned in the desert. Together the two boys manage to capture a mountain goat, which they milk and then kill for the meat, to keep them alive. Although they do not understand each other's language, and both assume the other is a fool, they somehow are able to work together to stay alive. Just when things seem to be going well, they are discovered by the two men from Walid's camel camp – Old Goat and Breath of dog, as Walid calls them – who attack the boys and try to kill them. Somehow Adam and Walid manage to escape and continue their journey towards Abudai.

The two boys face instances of real danger and come close to losing their lives on several occasions, but by working together they are finally returned to the compound and to safety. Adam discovers that his family had offered a reward for the boys' safe return, and it was this that led to Old Goat and Breath of Dog finally taking them back to the compound, where they are able to break free of the vehicle and run to safety. In a delightful ending, Walid is reunited with his mother, and the reward is given to Walid and his family to enable them to return to their home in Bangladesh.

Themes

Families

- There are some obvious differences between Adam's and Walid's families. They both live in the same country and are of a similar age, and yet their experiences are worlds apart. While Adam has the safety and support of his parents, Walid is already working extremely hard just to stay alive, having already lost his father and not knowing where his mother is or when he will ever see her again. How is it that two such similar boys can lead such startlingly different lives? Is it purely the luck of having been born in the more affluent West that is on Adam's side, or is it something else? Is it fair that people's lives can be so different just because of the place they are born? Discuss these questions as a class, using examples from current news and international events to aid in your discussion.
- Adam's sister puts her own life in danger to return to a country at war to try and save her brother's life. Is this something you would be willing to do for your own sibling? Discuss the idea of brothers and sisters and how important they are to you. Even if you think you don't really get along with your siblings very well, you might find it surprising to think about what you would be willing to do for them if their lives were in danger, or they really needed your help.

Survival

- Adam and Walid survive their desert journey by pooling their shared resources and knowledge, and working together to overcome obstacles in the path to their survival. Even though they are unable to speak each other's language, they manage to communicate when it is critical. Without Adam, Walid would not have been able to untie himself, and it is clear that without Walid's help Adam would not have survived for more than a day or two in the desert.
- In the first half day Adam consumes all the water he is carrying, making no attempt to ration his supplies or make any contingency plans. Again, Adam's knowledge of how to survive the elements is limited because of his comfortable Western lifestyle. When asked to gather food and water when they first leave the compound, Adam takes chocolate, cheese and coke ahead of any other staples that may have helped him survive. How might he have prepared himself better if he had known the journey that lay ahead of him? How do you think you would cope under the same circumstances? As a class or in small groups, make a list of the sorts of things you would take from your home if you were forced to leave and go out into the desert or the bush, to survive on only your wits. How difficult are the choices over what to take and what to leave behind?
- What are some of the different survival challenges people of the desert would be faced with on a day-to-day basis? For example, how do they find a regular water supply, and where do they get things like fresh fruit and vegetables? What would be your primary source of income in the desert, and how would you buy and trade in a market that has access only to the same things that you do? The internet should be able to help you find information on the nomadic people who live in the deserts in the Arabian Gulf, such as the

Bedu. Searching for a combination of these terms will find many links to sites offering an insight into the culture and lifestyle of these nomadic people.

Overcoming barriers

- There are several instances in the story where both Adam and Walid face what appear to be insurmountable barriers. Lost in the desert without water, it would seem the boys have no chance of survival, yet they are lucky enough to face a summer storm giving them some water and respite from the heat, and between them they are able to capture a goat to get milk to drink. Find some other examples in the text of times when it would seem Adam and Walid have run out of luck, only to get a 'break' that keeps them going a little bit longer. Are these realistic or simply a plot device to advance the story? If so, are they effective?
- One of the major barriers the boys overcome is their language barrier. When they first meet each other they are at complete odds, thinking the other boy stupid and a fool, yet several times we see that they both have the same idea but are unable to express this to one another because of their language constraints. What are some of the ways they overcome these language barriers? What are some of the universal signs (such as a high-five) that you use with your friends to express yourself without language? Think of some of the ways you might be able to communicate with a person who does not speak your language, through signs and actions. As an activity, write out some messages on small cards, then break into groups of two or three. Giving one member from each group a message card, then watch how they attempt to communicate the message without language. This is a little like charades and lets you see how difficult it can be to get by without language.
- How much is context a part of understanding a foreign language? There are times when Adam and Walid seem to understand what the other is saying simply because of the circumstances in which it is being said, or the context of the situation. How much of the foreign terms did you pick up when reading the book? As a class or small group you could make a glossary of terms, initially based on what you think each term might mean, and then by researching the words to find their actual definition. How close were you to interpreting words or phrases?

Taking risks

- Adam takes a huge risk in abandoning the convoy of cars when they stop at a service station near the beginning of the story. How justifiable are his reasons for wanting to return to the compound? (pp38/39) Had he really considered the dangers of being left alone in the middle of the desert? As it turns out the war only lasts for three days; short enough for the dog to have survived, although Adam is not to know that at the time he is forced to abandon her. What else might Adam have done under the circumstances? How would you have handled this situation?
- There is a moment when Adam discovers the convoy has moved on without him, and he realises the implications of what he has done. *"Holy Hell! They've gone and left me behind. For a minute I feel like crying, I'm so scared . . . How could they just leave me here? Why didn't they do a head count? I*

was only in the toilet. They should have guessed I might try something.” (p39)
Is this fair? Adam has tried to get left behind, and then when his plan succeeds he blames the people who left him behind! How might it feel to realise you are alone in a strange, dangerous environment? What could Adam have done straight away to get himself out of danger? Was there any other course of action he could have taken aside from heading out into the desert alone? Discuss this as a class.

- Adam and Walid put their lives in danger several times. When they steal the car and drive it across the desert they are in grave danger of having an accident, given that they are so young and Adam is obviously such an inexperienced driver. They then expose themselves to another extreme danger by stealing camels from a Bedu camp. Are these risks justified under the circumstances? Can you balance risking your own life if the outcome of not taking the risk may be worse? What are some of the other risks that Adam and Walid take, and what are the outcomes? Are they too worth the risk? Think of some instances when you have had to take a risk, knowing that the outcome of not taking it may be worse? If possible, discuss these scenarios as a group, possibly workshopping ideas for what might have been a better solution.
- Create some hypothetical scenarios where your life or safety is at risk, and think of some potential outcomes. Work through the steps that would need to be taken to reach these outcomes, talking as a group about the pros and cons of each idea. For example, imagine you have been left at an inner-city train station after the last train has been, and you have no mobile phone or money to call your parents. What might you do to get yourself home safely? Do you need to take any risks to achieve this outcome?

War

- When Adam first realises that bombs are being dropped on the Centra Tower, the tallest building in Abudai, he can't quite believe what he is seeing, even though he has grown up on a military airbase and, more than most children he may have an awareness and understanding of something of this magnitude. The enormity of it seems unreal even to the adults in the compound where Adam lives. Try and imagine what it must feel like to stand on your balcony and see this sort of catastrophe unravelling. How might you feel? Excited? Terrified? Confused? The families living in the compound react quickly to the threat of war, immediately packing their vehicles and getting across the boarder. What might it be like for those who are unable to leave? What of Chandra, the maid who works for Adam's family, and other local people? You could do some research into how wars impact on those people 'on the ground'; locals, or those who are unable to get away from the battlefield.
- How different might it be to live in a place like Abudai when war breaks out, as opposed to somewhere like an Australian city? What sorts of resources would you have access to in a Western country that would be different from a place like Abudai? You could write an example of the same war zone, one in a Western country like Australia or the US, and one in a Middle Eastern country like Afghanistan, and the impact on the local people. How would they unfold differently? Why?

- The war in Abudai lasts for only three days. Is this a realistic interpretation of such cataclysmic events? Could a war really be fought in three days? Do some research into wars over the past century and look at how, when and for how long they have been fought, and what the eventual outcomes have been. Often in Middle Eastern countries like Abudai, battles could be skirmishes taking place between neighbouring groups or tribes over issues such as food, water, or other basics of life. These battles were fought not with soldiers from clearly defined 'sides', but often in secret dawn raids to gain possession of whatever is being fought over. In the past these sorts of 'wars' were fought in hand-to-hand combat, with swords on camels or horseback. Because these groups now have access to 'Western' weaponry, they are now fought with guns and aeroplanes and bombs. The irony is that often the weapons used in this modern day warfare have been sold to them by Western countries, happy to reap financial reward and at the same time encourage this sort of bloodshed. The result of this is that tribal skirmishes that would have been resolved quickly and with minimal casualties in the past now escalate into much bigger battles, and have far greater casualties and loss of life.
- Is it fair to say that wars are fought today in a different way to how they were fought fifty or one hundred years ago? What has changed? Because of the nature of modern-day warfare, it might be possible that entire wars could be won or lost in a matter of days, whereas in wars of past generations it took this long for single battles to be fought. Talk about the differences as a class, using real examples to support your discussion.

Poverty

- It is a result of abject poverty that children can be sold by their families in countries around the world. Walid's family sold him to traders when he was only seven years old, and the expectation is that children need to earn their freedom to be returned to their family. It is not only in Middle Eastern countries that this trading in human life occurs; in countries throughout south-east Asia children are traded by their families to save their lives, in the hope that they will be able to earn their own freedom and go on to live a better life. It is through this deception that those people who trade in children are able to continue to do business, as there will always be poverty and there will always be families who want a better life for their children.
- Slavery, bonded labour and human trafficking are all crimes against people who are often too young or too poor to protect themselves or to get help. For accurate information about what these terms and what they actually mean in the real world, visit <http://www.antislaveryinternational.org/>.
- Try and imagine yourself in this sort of situation. What might it be like to have to leave your parents and perhaps be taken to another city or another country, to work virtually as a slave for your own livelihood? What sort of comforts would you be forced to live without? How might your sense of being a child change if you were forced to live on your own from such an early age? Consider the things that Walid is able to do, like slaughter a goat to feed himself, which seems so foreign to Adam. What other necessities of life would you have to learn to survive?
- When Adam shows Walid the two hundred dirhams he took before leaving home, he says *"I could buy ten pizzas or twenty Cokes or a hundred bottles of*

water.” (p62) But for Walid, who has never seen so much money before, he says “*With such richness, Mama and I could go home to our country and live like sheikhs.*” (p62) What are the obvious differences in the ways the two boys imagine spending the money? What does that say about the different lives they lead, and their understanding about the world and the way it functions for them? Discuss this question as a group.

Living in a foreign land

- For many families, the idea of living in another country for work is just a normal part of life, while for others it is an unimagined possibility. The world of visas, passports, overseas travel back and forth to your homeland (if you visit other family at home), new languages, cultures and experiences can seem like an overwhelming one, but for many life as an expatriate is as ordinary as anyone else’s life. What are some of the experiences that are referred to in the book about Adam and his family that are different from your own life? What does it mean to live in a ‘compound’ or gated community? Why do Adam’s family have to live in a compound?
- Is there anybody in your class who has lived in another country for an extended period of time? Do you have students in your class or your school who are living in Australia as expatriates of their home country? It would be interesting to ask these students to speak about their own experiences of living abroad, and the differences and difficulties they may have encountered in that time. Some internet research on being an expatriate should reveal some insightful information about the experience of living and travelling abroad.

Character analysis

Encourage students to look beyond the actions and words of the characters and probe into motives and psychology – why do people do the things they do?

- Identify characters in categories of Good and Bad (or other designated headings)
 - How do we determine who goes where?
 - Find examples of action, words or behaviour that support the selection criteria.
- Select four different characters from the story and analyse the choices they make.
 - What is the choice made up of? (i.e.: options, lesser of two evils, pros and cons)
 - What do they choose to do and why?
 - How does this decision impact upon the individual and those around him/her? (Remember to consider characters other than the main characters. For example, Adam’s parents making the decision to allow him to stay home alone, or Mr Hartliss, who allows Adam to leave his car at the service station without checking that he is able to travel with another family)
- List each of the main characters and answer the following questions:

- What is important to this character?
- Do you have anything in common with him/her?
- How would you describe his/her temperament?
- What coping strategies does this character employ and do they work?
- Reflect on this character's actions in the story. Write about how you feel towards him/her and why you think this character elicits such a response.
- Consider the relationships between characters. Each person impacts upon others and brings something unique and of value. Evaluate Adam and Walid in terms of what each has to offer.
 - What ability, talent or skill can each make use of?
 - Find examples of these things and how they were used to influence or change a situation for others.
- Write down three words that spring to mind when asked to describe qualities the following characters have:
 - Adam
 - Walid
 - Old Goat and/or Breath of Dog
 - Sarah

Important passages and quotes

“It seems,’ he says, ‘that if two such boys from different cultures can learn to live together and survive such a perilous journey, then there is something here for we adults.’ (p167)

- What is the message in this quote? What do you think the adults in the story might learn from the way Adam and Walid pull together to overcome their situation? Sometimes children can teach adults a lot about seeing past the differences in a person's skin colour or cultural background, to the person within. Do you agree? Why is this?
- Discuss this quote in the context of the world you live in, and the wider world. You may be able to find many other examples through history of when people have overcome enormous differences to come together for the greater good. Consider, for example, the historical story of soldiers on the Western Front who, on Christmas day in WW1, left their trenches and gathered in no-mans-land to swap photographs and cigarettes and to play cricket, before returning to their trenches and continuing their bloody battle. Sometimes language is not needed to bridge a gap between two people, or groups of people. Can you think of your own examples of when something like this has happened? Perhaps you have been directly involved in something similar. Discuss your stories with your class.

Adam: “But how could his mother give him away like that?”

Sarah: “If Mum had had the choice of us both starving to death in Bangladesh or giving us what she believed would be a chance to be educated and make some money, I think she would have done exactly the same thing.” (p164)

- It is very hard to imagine what it must take a parent to have to give their child away for the hope of a better life. For Walid's mother, with no husband to help support the family, this was her only option to save her son's life. What do you think your parents would do? How might it feel to have to leave your family and go to another country to work like an adult? This would be a good impetus for some personal writing, with students imagining themselves in Walid's situation. Walid's outcome is ultimately a very positive one, but it certainly wouldn't end this way for everyone.

- In our own history in Australia we have seen children taken from their parents, being told it will offer the children a better chance for life. Is this always right? Can children and parents really be happy being separated from one another? Discuss the history of families who have been separated in this way, not only in Australia but in many other countries throughout the world.

"We've got no right to be up on our high horse anyway...It was only a hundred or so years ago that we were sending children up chimneys and down coal mines." (p168)

- What does Sarah mean by this? Do some internet research into child labour over history in things like chimney sweeping and coal mining (a good place to look at the history of children in the coal mines is <http://www.pitwork.net/history1.htm#child>) and discuss with students the idea of being forced into work at such a young age. Think about the repercussions of this to the rest of your life, like not finishing your education, developing illnesses such as black lung, being kept away from your family, not having a chance to live as a child, etc.

Story-telling Q & A activity

- Plan a story to tell to your students of a child being sent away from their family to work. This could take the form of a child like Walid working as a camel jockey, a chimney sweep in 19th century Europe, an American child sent to work in the cotton fields or down in the mines, or even a modern-day child who is taken out of school at a young age to work in the family business. Plan your story thoroughly beforehand, clearly defining each character in the story and the point-of-view they come from, their reason for doing what they did, and the unfolding events of the story. Make the story as interesting to your students as possible, with some dramatic conflict that needs to be overcome or resolved, and a satisfying (although not necessarily a positive) ending.

- Before you tell your students this story, explain to them the rules of the storytelling. They must not interrupt or ask any questions while the story is being told, but they may jot down on paper any questions they might wish to ask of any of the characters within the story, just as though they were getting the chance to 'interview' each person in the story.

- At the end of the telling, open the class up to question time. Students must tell you who the question is for prior to asking the question itself, and allow you time to 'get into character'. You then attempt to answer the question from the perspective of that particular character.

- To begin with, the questions may be quite simple, but as students get the hang of the activity and you begin to enjoy each character's persona, this can become a very enlightening activity for all concerned, and the questions will likely become more complex and thought provoking. Remember to remain in character while answering your questions. For example, in *Camel Rider* you could be answering questions posed to Old Goat, Walid, Tara the dog who is left behind, Mr Hartliss who allows Adam to leave the convoy, of even the Prime Minister of Abudai!

- There may be some heated discussion amongst the students about some of the questions (and some of the answers!). It is important that the children are told at the outset that they need to wait for each question to be asked and answered before they interrupt. Some of the skills students will take from an activity like this include taking an active part in their own learning, the ability to ask a question and be interested in finding the answer, learning to understand about different points-of-view, and learning that there is usually more than one side to every story.



PRUE MASON

CAMEL RIDER

A story of adventure, and two boys
from different worlds...