

NOBODY'S BOY

Teacher's Notes

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1. Outline of the story

Ron Green is a cheerful boy who makes friends easily, but his life is complicated. From an early age he has had carers, Pearl and Brian, who mind him when his drug-addicted mother is unable to. At times, Ron lives a transient life with his mother, but he is taken from her when she overdoses and Ron, at the age of seven, saves her life. As a result, Ron is fostered numerous times and attends eight different schools.

All Ron wants is to live with his dad. He has done so in the past but dad's new wife Anna feels threatened when Ron's mother creates trouble and the police are called. This time, Ron is sent to live with his aunt Maree who has three young sons, the bane of Ron's life. Ron detests this placement and is happy when his caseworker takes him for respite care to the home of Rose and Bob as Pearl and Brian are travelling around Australia.

Ron feels settled in this new home and creates trouble with Maree who decides to terminate the fostering. Living with Rose and Bob has many bonuses for Ron. The couple treats him with respect and love. Ron attends the local school and makes friends with a group of boys and best friends with shy Dylan and outgoing Nina, both of whom have troubled homes. Dad takes Ron for some weekend treats and more and more Ron wishes to be with him full-time. Meanwhile, Ron wins the grade five handball competition, has a party for his tenth birthday, competes in the school cross-country race, and best of all, flies to Melbourne with his new foster parents when Bob wins a sporting award. Mum begins to write to Ron from prison and Dad announces that Anna is going to have a baby. Ron

acts out his frustration with not being able to live with Dad and his relationship with Rose and Bob begins to fray. One night, he and Nina run away from home with Ron's new puppy, Jason, but they are found by the police and returned to their respective carers. Dad and Anna's relationship breaks down and it is this which finally leads to Dad deciding to have Ron live with him. Ron's story ends with Pearl and Brian home from their trip and a reunion with Rose and Bob.

2. Writer's Notes

Where did the idea come from?

Like many other authors, I have invented some of the story, but I've also made use of my own experience. My husband, Bill, and I have fostered several children so I have first-hand knowledge of fostering and some of the problems that foster children have in adapting to a new family. Sometimes children come to foster parents via the courts, sometimes through non-government agencies. Often foster children have had numerous other foster families. All of the children have been taken from their birth families because of problems such as mental impairment, imprisonment, drug or alcohol abuse, or even child neglect and/or abuse. I used to read books about foster children to my own – in particular two marvellous books, *Ruby Holler* by Sharon Creech and *The Pinballs* by Betsy Byars – and saw how my foster children really related to the stories' protagonists. I wanted to write a story about a foster child with no siblings in an Australian setting and I knew that I wanted it to have a happy ending.

The ending holds hope for the protagonist, Ron. How did you arrive at this ending?

All of the children Bill and I fostered finished up living with one of their parents. As much as they loved Bill and me, we knew that the children's first preference was to be with their natural parents. We encouraged our foster children to maintain their links with their

mums and dads, by letter, email, phone and in person. One publisher who looked at the manuscript and rejected it said that she was a foster mum and 'her children had never gone back to their families' and that I was giving false hope to any foster child who yearned to be reunited with their birth parents. However, despite her belief, I think that every child is entitled to hope, even when their situation might be bleak. That's why Ron in my book goes eventually to live with his much loved dad.

Why is this a verse novel?

After writing many other novels, I decided it was time to stretch myself as a writer and work in a form that was new for me. I am a great admirer of verse novelists such as Steven Herrick and Dorothy Porter, and saw that verse novels had been successfully published in both Australia and America so thought perhaps I could also write a publishable verse novel for children. Over the years I have also have written many poems, mostly for the adult market. I love to experiment with writing imagery, just as I love to read lyrical poetry.

Why don't the poems rhyme?

Rhyming poetry is really difficult to do well. Sometimes poets allow rhymes to trap them into using weaker words that rhyme but don't make sense or aren't appropriate. Without the use of regular rhyme, free verse allows me to use other poetic devices such as line breaks, imagery, alliteration, white space, half-rhyme and rhythm.

3. Possible questions for your students:

- a. Do you know any foster children? Have you talked to them about their life?

- b. What do you think it would be like to be a foster child? How would you cope if you were ever in that situation?
- c. If you could choose different parents than your own, who would you choose and why?
- d. Who are the members of your own family? Do you have any family stories?
- e. Do you have an extended family? Who is the oldest? The youngest? How does everyone support one another?
- f. Have you read a verse novel before? How would you describe a verse novel? Do you agree with the author's decision not to have rhyming verse?
- g. Do you agree with Anna and Ron senior's decision not to have Ron junior living with them? Why or why not?
- h. What would it be like to have a parent with a drug or alcohol problem?

4. Comprehension

Answer these questions about the story.

- a. Name all of the people Ron lives with.
- b. What are the names of two of Ron's teachers?
- c. Who are the boys Ron plays with when he goes to the new school after moving in with Rose and Bob?
- d. Who are Jason and Buster?
- e. What are some of the activities Ron and his father do together?
- f. Who in the story said the following?
 - i. Fill it up with your favourite food
 - ii. Your mum will be well soon
 - iii. What do you get if you lie under a cow?
 - iv. Do it how I say and you'll do super well.
- g. What kind of work does Bob do?
- h. Why does Ron find reading so difficult?
- i. What hotel does Rose, Bob and Ron stay in while they are in Melbourne?
- j. Why does Ron have a poor opinion of Meredith?
- k. Why are Rosie and Bob amazed when Ron's dad takes Ron back the night he and Nina run away?
- l. Dylan has two different talents: what are they?
- m. Why do you think Ron lost his temper in the verse titled 'I Go Ballistic'?
- n. What are the good and bad things about Ron's mother?

5. Writing Activities

- a. Use as many words as you can to describe the character of Ron.
- b. Why did Ron prefer to live with Rosie and Bob rather than with Maree and her sons?
- c. Write a dialogue between Ron and his dad in which Ron asks why he can't live with him. Have Dad giving his reasons.
- d. Adapt the story of *Nobody's Boy* into a play and perform it. Alternatively, adapt several scenes and perform them.
- e. Try writing a poem in free verse that tells of Ron's life when he goes to live with his Dad at the end of the book.
- f. Work in pairs to write six questions to ask Ron. Then use the text – and your imaginations – to supply answers. Here are a few questions to get you started:
 - i. Describe the night you saved your mother's life.
 - ii. Did you like living with your mother on the streets? Why or why not?
 - iii. What do you most like about your father?
- g. Write an acrostic poem using the words Ron Green
- h. Following the events in the book, keep a diary for Ron from the time he gets onto the plane to go to Melbourne up until (and including) the day he goes back to school after the trip. You might like to draw pictures to help illustrate your diary.

i. Write a review of *Nobody's Boy* and your reactions to the book (see below)

Title: _____

Author: _____

Illustrator: _____

Publisher: _____

Classification (or genre): _____

Setting (where and when): _____

Favourite character: _____

Basic plot (keep it brief):

Favourite part of the novel:

Why you would recommend this book:

Rating out of 10: _____

6. Word usage

In the following sentences, replace each word in italics with a synonym found in the book:

- a. Scream and *curse*
- b. Dad has the same name as me
ishandsome like me
- c. Mum *hit* Dad
in the face.
- d. Her voice was all over the house
bouncing off walls
a teacher going *mad*
- e. *pawned* them at the pawnbrokers
- f. he laughed like a *wild animal*
- g. *At last* they rang Hell
And found my aunt.
- h. I run *jobs* for Maree
- i. Once he *rampaged* through the house
- j. I wait in her shadow
bellyturning over
- k. The monsters come
they're *redevouring* me.

7. Timeline

Create a time line putting each of the scenes below in the correct order in which they happened.

- Ron and Nina run away.
- Ron finds Jason.
- Ron goes to a new school where he meets Dylan.
- Ron and his dad live together on their own.
- Ron's dad tells Ron that Anna is expecting a baby.
- Ron goes to Melbourne with Rosie and Bob
- Maree takes her three boys to the circus.
- Rosie is there when Ron has a nightmare
- The caseworker takes Ron to meet Rosie and Bob.
- Dylan stays with Ron while his mum is in hospital.
- It's Christmas time and Ron's dad takes him to the mall to buy presents.

8. Illustrations

- a. Use pictures and words to describe the physical appearance of the following people:
 - i. Dylan
 - ii. Geordie
 - iv. Max
 - v. Laurie
 - vi. Ron's dad

- b. Take a scene from the book and turn it into a comic strip using the boxes below. Remember that unlike the story version, the cartoon needs to convey all information using either dialogue or pictures. (Illustration is four rectangles 18 X 5 cm)
- c. Paint a picture of your favourite scene from the book.
- d. Use plasticene or paper Mache to make models of Buster and Jason.

9. Drama

- a. Act out the scene from the book where Ron goes to the restaurant with Rosie and Bob and finish it when he is calling for his mum and dad.
- b. Work in pairs to create dialogue between Ron and Nina or Ron and Dylan
- c. Create a mime showing Ron going ballistic over his new bike and walking home with Bob to Rose.
- d. In the supermarket with Rose and Bob, Ron was allowed to choose his favourite foods. Write a list of your ten favourite foods.
- e. Talk to your class about the key people in your family and how you feel about them.
- f. Debate whether or not Ron's mother should have been able to take Ron after she had left prison. Why should his father be allowed to have full custody when he had relegated his parental role to other people?