

TEACHERS' NOTES

BEFORE THE STORM

by

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These notes can be copied for use in the classroom.

SYNOPSIS

BC and Fox appear in a Melbourne alley in one night in April 1901. They are cadets from the future, and have come back through time to prevent the bombing of Australia's first parliament. BC has been badly wounded in a fight before they left. Soon after his arrival, Fox rescues two teenagers, Emily and Daniel, from a boating accident, and he is welcomed into their home by their grateful parents. While Fox has a bath, Emily finds a strange device in his clothes, and accidentally sets it off. It projects scenes of a desperate and deadly battle onto the wall, in which Fox's dynamic commander BC is shot. Emily becomes obsessed by BC, and blackmails her brother Daniel into spying on him.

Days later, and with the help of Barry the Bag, an unsavoury friend of Daniel's, Emily goes to where Fox is living. Here they find that BC is alive, but very sick. After convincing BC and Fox that they want to help, they managed to clean up BC's wound and get him to North Brighton, where he is safer. Here they learn that the opening of Australia's first parliament will be bombed by foreign spies, touching off a century of total war between the British and German empires. The British have developed a machine to send atomic weapons through time, but BC and Fox have rebelled, and used that machine to travel back a hundred years and prevent their future from happening.

Emily is forced to take over when BC lapses into a coma. Daniel, Barry and Fox go looking for the spies, and begin to suspect that they are not Germans at all. Their search takes them into the world of Melbourne's artistic community of 1901, where Daniel begins dating Muriel, a schoolgirl artist who is his sister's worst enemy. Meantime Barry does some investigations of his own in Melbourne's railway system, where he and his father work.

The day of parliament opening is the occasion of a huge celebration in Melbourne. BC has recovered enough to lead them, and Muriel discovers that the German spies are really British terrorists. The teenagers cannot prevent the bombs being planted and their fuses lit, but there is no explosion. While BC and the others have been focussed on fighting the bombers, Barry the Bag learned that they hid their bombs on a railway waggon. Barry has swapped bags of cotton waste for the dynamite, then sold it on the black market.

The cadets from the future have learned that military solutions are not the only way to win, the nightmare future becomes a closed loop in time, and the Twentieth Century will now be the way that we know it.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The information, discussion question questions and activity ideas which follow are intended to enhance your students' reading of Before the Storm. Please feel free to adapt these materials to suit your needs and interests.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sean McMullen is one of Australia's leading SF and fantasy authors, with fourteen books and sixty stories published, for which he has won over a dozen awards. His most recent novels are *The Ancient Hero* (The Quentaris Chronicles, 2004) and *Voidfarer* (2006). Although Australian, Sean has been mainly published in America and Europe. His work is a mixture of romance, invention and adventure, populated by dynamic, strange and often hilarious characters. When younger Sean played and sang in folk and rock bands, and has spent twenty-five years in martial arts, mainly in karate (he is a third dan black belt) and fencing. He works in scientific computing, and is finishing a PhD in medieval fantasy.

WRITING AND RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

1. Making History

Check the internet and your library about the opening of Australia's first parliament. Print out some of the photographs and accounts that show what a really big event it was, and how excited the people of Melbourne were when it happened. Try to find pictures of the maypole mentioned in the novel, the police of 1901, the actual opening of parliament by the duke, and the crowds outside. Write a paragraph describing what you would have seen and done if you had gone to the event.

2. Leadership

BC is fifteen, and has been a cadet leader since the age of seven. Emily is sixteen when she has to take over from BC, but she has a sheltered background and virtually no experience of leading people. Nobody would willingly follow Barry, but he organises people to do things without them realising that he is leading them. Muriel gets her way with boys in general and Daniel in particular by batting her eyelashes and smiling. All four are controlling people in one way or another, but only BC is a trained leader. Make a list of ways that people in your class get others to do what they want (no names, please), whether they are official leaders or not (include yourself). Which people would you obey because they inspire you? Which of them would you obey because it would be too much fuss or embarrassment to cross them? Write about how you now feel about following particular leaders, having thought about it.

3. Military Solutions

At the start of the novel, when the two battle-hardened cadets from the future arrive in 1901 with their super-weapon, it seems as if the bombing of parliament will be stopped in some deadly shoot-out with the conspirators. There is some fighting in *Before the Storm*, but none of it is directly necessary for stopping the bombing. Later in the book we learn that the two cadets actually dislike fighting. If you were one of the characters, could you have reduced the amount of fighting even further? List the scenes where fighting was unavoidable. List the scenes where the characters might have avoided fighting, but achieved the same outcome. How they could have done it?

4. Music

A: Pop Music: In 1901 people generally made their own music, and popular songs were sung to one's friends while someone played the piano. Gramophones were still rare, primitive, and expensive. Find a website with old-time popular songs and tunes, and list the five most popular songs of 1901. Try singing a verse from each of them into your MP3, mobile phone, or some other recorder – you don't have to play these back to anyone else if it is too painful. Now think about the most popular songs today. Write a paragraph about how different pop music would be today if there were no radios, recorders or internet, so that people could only hear the music live or by singing it themselves.

B: Folk Music: Find a website with the tunes of the folk songs quoted in the novel. The titles are not standardised, but try The Press Gang, The New Deserter, The Bells of Old Bailey, and The Lass of Richmond Hill. (The Eton Boating Song and the Roentgen Rays song were only mentioned, you do not have to include them.) Are dressing up in 1901 costumes and singing these songs the only experiences you can really share with the novel's characters? Try singing them to yourself – or in class if you feel brave – then write about how you feel about sharing the music with the characters, and if it has affected you.

5. Understanding Others

Both the future Australia of Fox and BC, and the Australia of 1901, come across as a lot less liberal and tolerant than ours. Many of the characters have attitudes to match. For example, Emily thinks that Muriel Baker and Barry the Bag both have loose morals, and so she thinks they cannot possibly be of any real help. BC, on the other hand, has been trained to assess people fairly, and is able to see Barry's potential talents, as well as Daniel's dangerous self-destructive streak. Put yourself in Emily's position, except that you are trying to learn from BC and assess Barry and Muriel fairly – even though you despise them both. Write short – but fair – paragraphs about both of them. If Emily had done this in the novel, what would have changed? Could Emily have forced herself to see her brother's self-destructive streak, or admit to herself that she helped cause it?

6. Understanding Yourself

Fifteen years of his strict mother and domineering sister have left Daniel with very low self-esteem. The girls and women in his real life control him, while those in his imagination are unapproachable angels that he can only impress by dying for them. After thirty minutes of Muriel Baker's company, Daniel's self-destructive attitude is already sinking fast, and after a week of holding hands with her he is genuinely shocked with himself for risking his life to save BC. As he is told later, 'You have learned that while it is easy to die for someone, it is a lot nicer to live for them.' Daniel's life is changed by a charming and sympathetic girlfriend, and Fox's life is changing because he has been given a sketch pad and pencil. Imagine that you are Barry the Bag: in the morning you are facing a life of poverty and petty crime, but by the afternoon you are a secret hero who has saved the world from a century of total war. Having survived a date with Emily, you are sitting with Daniel and talking about the future. As Barry, would you be happier the way you are (a survivor), or would take the opportunity to break out if it came along? Not everyone gets the chance to deputise for BC, date Muriel Baker, or save the world. Would you wait for an opportunity to change your life, or would you make your own changes? Write a few lines of dialogue between Barry and Daniel. They might start:

'Ya know Dan, I used to dream of just leadin' me own push, but after today I reckon I could be a important criminal.'

'Oh no, Barry, I see you more as a master spy for the king.'

'Ya reckon? Like, yer not just sayin' that 'cause we're mates, are ya?' . . .

7. Politics and Big Events

A: Politics: The bad guys in this book are from a British secret society. They want to keep the British Empire as a collection of colonies with only limited self-government. What arguments against Australian Federation were put up at the time, and what people were against it? Make a list of the arguments raised against Federation. Do you think some people might have been so passionate about them that they would bomb parliament and blame Germany to preserve and unify the Empire? Write about which argument you think was the most important.

B: Big Events: Which is the bigger event: the bombing of the first Australian parliament, or Barry the Bag stealing the bombs and selling them on the black market? Have you or one of your friends ever seen something really bad about to happen and stopped it, like turning a hose on a pile of smouldering rubbish before it burns a house down? Write a paragraph about what actually happened, and another about what could have happened if you had done nothing.

8. Language and Class

Fox has been conditioned to only use the Battle Standard language, and he sounds less intelligent than BC who can speak Courtly – what we call ordinary English. Do you find that people who cannot speak your language properly sound unintelligent? How do you think you would seem to people in another country, where you did not know the language? Get some people who have read *Before the Storm* together, choose a subject, and try to discuss it in Battle Standard. What is hard about using it? What is easy? Does it bring you closer together? Now have the rest of the group speaking Courtly while only you speak Battle Standard. Does it feel frustrating or humiliating? Did you feel excluded, or even inferior?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH

1. Early in the book we see 1901 examples of sexism (girls excluded from a wide range of activities), racism (comments against Chinese and Indians) and even misguided sex education (babies supposedly arriving in suitcases) that seem quite extreme or even ludicrous today. Which of our attitudes do you think will look just as silly in 2101?

2. German agents were blamed for the bombing of parliament, but British ultra-imperial terrorists were really to blame. Do you think that people, organisations, and even countries have staged attacks on themselves in order to gain sympathy or unity? Can you think of examples?

3. BC and Fox are highly skilled and very dangerous warriors, yet we learn that both of them strongly dislike violence. Do you think violence loses its glamour when people have too much experience with it?

4. Did you know that Melbourne was an important artistic centre in 1901, and that some artists came here from Europe to paint? What are the names of some real artists who may have been present in the St Kilda cafés when the novel's characters were there? Where else did the artists socialise, and where did they paint?

5. Australia was a collection of colonies until the opening of the first Australian parliament in May 1901. How many years did it take to get the colonies to agree to merge into one country?

6. To our eyes Emily seems to have a lot of restrictions on her freedom to go anywhere, how she can behave, and even on what she can read. Daniel has restrictions as well, but they are less obvious. What are they? Why do Muriel and Barry seem to have more freedom?

7. How do you think you could cope with having to live like Emily or Daniel?

8. Barry is going to leave school at the age of fourteen and work in the railways. How long is it since teenagers could leave school at this age (legally) and go to work?

9. Fox and BC would be described as veteran child soldiers in today's language. Emily and Daniel come from a sheltered background, but are very well educated. Barry is highly streetwise, and has very good survival skills. Muriel knows about sex appeal and how to use it, and already has plans for a career. Who do you think is the most mature? Who do you think is the most like teenagers today?

10. Fox and BC come from a background where military solutions are the only solutions. Barry only cares about stopping the bombing, and he does it without any violence. If you had been Emily, would you have paid more attention to Barry's suggestions? Why?

11. Why do you think Emily was so upset when she saw Daniel holding hands with Muriel Baker? Was it because she disliked Muriel in the first place, or was it because she was losing control of her brother?

12. Why do you think Barry the Bag was so upset when he saw Daniel holding hands with Muriel? Do you think he felt threatened because his best mate now had a girlfriend? Do you think he was right to feel threatened?

13. Muriel comes across as quite a liberated girl for her time, and has ideas about women's careers and rights that were very advanced for 1901. Some early campaigners for women's rights were called suffragettes. Why would nobody have called Muriel a suffragette in *Before the Storm*?

14. Several folk songs have been quoted in the novel, and in folk songs people often sing about their problems. Do you think that is because it makes problems easier to bear? Why? Do you think this is why pop songs about love and all its complications are so popular today?

15. The author is a martial arts instructor, and he rehearsed many of the action scenes from the novel with students in his club to make sure that they were realistic. Do you prefer novels with a realistic details and backgrounds, or is the story more important?

16. Do you think historical novels must always get the history right? Do you learn most of your history from novels and movies, or history books and documentaries? Do you think that novels and movies bend the truth too much, in order to make the story more exciting?

17. You are just about to audition for a television version of *Before the Storm*. Which character do you want to play, and why?

18. When Daniel first meets Muriel in the café, he thinks of himself as a little boy. He soon realises that Muriel sees him as an interesting young man. Have you ever found that someone thought you were older than you are? Did it change the way you think about yourself?

19. Emily thinks that she is in love with BC, but she eventually realises that she really wants BC as a role model. Do you think role models are a good idea? What are the advantages? What are the dangers? Did Emily's experience change your views on role models?

20. Read what Muriel says to Daniel in the café about female artists (pages 191 and 192). Do you agree with her? Has anything changed for female artists since 1901? Why do you think most famous artists are men?

21. You are suddenly taken back in time to 1914, two weeks before Arch-Duke Ferdinand is assassinated in Sarajevo, Serbia. This is the event that triggered World War 1. Do you think you could do anything to save him? How would you get the authorities to take you seriously?

22. BC, Fox, and the rest of their crew are absolutely alone when they attack the time travel weapon. They have betrayed their friends, classmates, academy, country, and empire. Do you think teenagers are more or less likely than adults to sacrifice everything and rebel for an important cause? Imagine that one of your teenage grandchildren travels back in time from 2050, tells you that all your other descendants have been wiped out in a climate change famine, then asks you to do something to save the future. What would you reply?

23. BC causes a sensation when invited to the Lang's home for dinner. If a teenage aristocrat like BC were to come to your home for dinner, would your family react like the Langs did? Would your family make a bigger fuss if BC were a teenage movie star? Why?

24. The Imperial War College, where BC and Fox were trained, uses the sport of rowing to

teach its squads of cadets to work together perfectly, and be totally loyal to each other. Can you think of any sport that does this better?

25. What are Roentgen Rays? What are they called today, and why was the name changed?

26. At the end of the book BC says, 'We are all trapped in cages, yet all of us carry the keys. Finding the courage to use the keys, that is the hard part.' Do you agree? Do you think it gets harder or easier to change our lives as we get older?

27. BC and Fox are from a future where the bombing of the 1901 Australian parliament happened. Now that it has been prevented, they should never have existed – and so the bombing would happen anyway. How does the author explain the fact that they still exist after the bombing has been stopped, and the future has now changed?

28. Look at this photograph of the Yarra River, at the place where Emily and Daniel nearly drowned in the novel. What is the only object in the photograph that Daniel and Emily would have seen in 1901? What else would have looked familiar to them? Do you think more of Melbourne's historic buildings should have been preserved?



(Note to teachers: The answer is Princess Bridge, which was completed in 1888. The spires on St Paul's Cathedral were only added after 1926. The Flinders Street Station that we know was only completed in 1910, and replaced a much smaller building that the characters would have used. There were racing rowing boats on the river in 1901, but they were wooden boats, not the white fibre glass boats that we see today. The grass, reeds and water probably looked about the same.)