

## **STORY JOURNEY AND CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH SUSANNE GERVAY'S BOOKS**

**Susanne Gervay**

### **ABSTRACT**

Story journey in socially realistic literature, is a powerful way to engage students in literacy and critical thinking. The social realism genre of books can draw readers into journeys of life, where they identify, question, seek, resolve, emotionally and critically engage.

As an author, I write story journeys that engage readers in critical thinking. 'I Am Jack' is becoming a rite-of passage junior fiction on school bullying where readers are drawn into story journey, challenging them to engage and critically think about the process of bullying. 'Super Jack' challenges young readers to explore the complexities of blending families. As readers are drawn into the JACK books, through humour and real life situations, they are empowered to think about not only bullying and blended families, but areas as divergent as aging, bush fires, multi-culturalism, family, community, social responsibility.

My young adult books 'Butterflies' and 'The Cave' are more confronting than my younger JACK books, as YA readers question key areas including spirituality, sexuality, friendship, peer group power, leadership, gender, dependence-independence through story.

'That's Why I Wrote This Song', my new YA novel, takes critical literacy into new areas with the blending of creative mediums, integrating lyrics, music and film. The lyrics and music that drive the book are written by Tory Gervay to create edgy new literature, while the script and filmic interpretation of the lyrics and book have been written and produced by young film make Rachel Guerry. Songs and video clip are downloadable.

[www.sgervay.com](http://www.sgervay.com)

## **Story Journey and Critical Thinking Through Susanne Gervay's Books**

*Challenges are faced by each of us, every day of our life. ... Susanne Gervay's novel, 'Butterflies' ... in particular it is about the emotions and consequences faced by one individual who has been given the opportunity to gain strength and build character around her life.*

*Life is often not easy, can often be perceived as cruel and can be questioned. However, 'Butterflies' shows that life is also full of many wonderful people and that those most important to each of us are our family and friends who are there with us through all our 'challenges'*

*Louise Sauvage OAM*

*World Sportsperson of the Year with a Disability 2000*

*1999 Australian Female Athlete of the Year.*

Louise Sauvage's comments about my book *Butterflies* could also have applied to John Marsden's award winning novel *So Much to Tell* about a girl locked into silence until her reconciliation with her parents; or Christobel Mattingley's moving story of a refugee family in Bosnia, *No Guns for Asmir*; or Colin Thiele's revelation of heroism of a young girl with rheumatoid arthritis in *Jodie's Journey*; or Wendy Orr's narrative, *Peeling The Onion*, which poignantly explores a teenager's struggles with severe injuries from a car accident.

Readers through powerful literature can become fellow travellers in story journey, enabling them to identify with other people and the challenges of life. Literacy incorporates critical thinking through story journey, in a way where readers can gain insight, develop their strategies for conflict resolution, question, seek, resolve, travel the many steps towards understanding and the pursuit of knowledge.

As a specialist in child growth and development, a parent and a children's and young adult author, I write books to engage, entertain and develop constructs of critical thinking, where youth can move towards developing their self-concept; increase their

understanding of human behaviour and motivations; provide a way to find interests outside of self; achieve emotional understanding; open the way to self empowerment and decision making; and share experiences.

Young people read differently to adults, where if a book 'speaks' to them, they will read and re-read that book, testing it against their developing value system, incorporating concepts that they feel are relevant to who they are. So story journey can be a powerful and effective methodology towards critical thinking.

I wrote 'I Am Jack' when I discovered that my son Jack, who was 11 years old then, was being bullied at school. I couldn't believe that he didn't tell me. That I didn't know or see the signs. I felt I had failed my son even though my children are pivotal to my life.

My son had more courage than I had. Every day he went to school knowing that he had to face bullying. He was scared and felt alone. Why didn't he tell me? I was a sole parent then, worked, was tired a lot of the time. He wanted to be brave, not put more pressure on me. That was one reason, but there were others too, such as inexperience in dealing with aggression, fear of the reaction if he sought help, disempowerment.

As a parent, we want to protect our children, keep them safe. As teachers we want our children to learn in a safe environment. Bullying makes school a dangerous place rather than a place where children socialise and learn.

It took six months for my son to win against bullying with the support of myself, his family, teacher, school, the other children and of course Jack. From that he has become a more secure person. He knows that the world can be fair and safe. He trusts the system. He feels positive about himself, has friends, learns and embraces the world.

The whole school won too. The teachers and school, the other children and parents were also empowered by their actions where they changed the environment of bullying within their school. The bully was helped as well as he learnt aggression does not pay and the system can work towards helping him. Everyone won against bullying in the end.

Linning, Phillips and Turton (1997) in a literature based approach to bullying at school, showed that by taking students on a journey through a book such as 'I Am Jack', bullying can be explored in a non threatening way, creating positive and meaningful strategies that are successful against bullying.

Jenny Foster developed a literacy and literature programme using 'I Am Jack' which has been very successful in achieving literacy and critical thinking outcomes.

*'Using literature in teaching is a way of connecting across the curriculum and creating powerful learning experiences. A successful cross-curriculum experience using Susanne Gervay's novel, I AM JACK was conducted with a year 5/6 reading group at Winmalee Public School. The class teacher, working with the teacher librarian, created a unit of work to achieve reading and viewing literacy outcomes, to address values and attitudes of interpersonal behaviours - specifically bullying, and to use the library and computers as tools in student learning. The result was an effective unit of work that proved to be generated much discussion and had some interesting spin offs.'* (Jenny Foster, 'I Am Jack - Using Literature to Teach about Bullying)

As a follow up to 'I Am Jack', I wrote 'Super Jack'. Like 'I Am Jack' it fosters literacy and challenges young people to think critically. Dianne Dempsey (The Age, Review 6/9/2003) wrote:

*Every institution from Play-school to kindergarten to schools colludes in the illusion that life is about Mum, Dad, two kids and Big Ted. It is extraordinary, still, that so little is written and so little spoken to help children deal with divorce, which is a major trauma in the lives of many. Divorce may be common but it is painful. Susanne Gervay writes humorously but with honesty about the rigours of living in a mix-master family.*

*Jack's little sister Samantha thinks life with the new stepdad will be all Coke and chips but Jack knows now "there won't be any night when she can get into Mum's bed."*

*Jack faces the problems of dealing with a new stepdad. A stepbrother and also having his Gran come and live with them on a family trip to the Gold Coast. Gervay's strength lies not only in her humour and honesty but in the fact that her characters are the sort you*

*wouldn't mind sharing the back seat with. Her language is also rich and colourful; her imagery is there to assist the narrative rather than show off in an ostentatious literary display. Jack's little Italian girlfriend Anna has 'chocolate drop eyes.'*

*The John Marsdens of the writing scene are very good at top-level abuse and the Paul Jennings are excellent in sheer fun but Susanne Gervay is rare in her ability to place common problems for children within the spectrum of normal family life. The result is that she makes it OK for the children to talk about them.'*

My young adult books (YA) 'Butterflies' and 'The Cave' are more confronting than my younger JACK books, with search for identity, as the driver, exploring areas such as spirituality, sexuality, friendship, peer group power, leadership, gender, dependence-independence.

'The Cave' is an uncompromisingly male coming of age novel. It reveals male culture as young men search for their place in the world today. It explores mateship, independence, sexuality, leadership, male humour and the way they speak, or don't speak. It is about girls - getting them, discarding them, wanting them. However, ultimately 'The Cave' reveals the underbelly of peer group pressure and male capacity for violence and courage.

'Butterflies' is an uncompromisingly female coming of age novel. It reveals female culture as young women search for their place in the world. It explores girlfriends, peer group pressure, sensitivity, sexuality, independence and the way girls speak and think. It is about boys – wanting them, loving them, relationships. Butterflies explores the way women participate in the world, meeting unique challenges in unique ways.

'Butterflies' and 'The Cave' invites youth to engage in confronting and powerful story journeys. It allow them to explore, think and develop their own pathways to the future meeting literacy and critical thinking outcomes.

An example of one area explored in 'The Cave' is war. At a time when boys are facing the realities of war, when the media confronts them with the heroism and horror of it, 'The Cave' engenders discussion and encourages an emotional engagement in critical

thinking. This extract from 'The Cave' exemplifies the power of story journey, opening discussion about war in terms of courage, mateship, leadership, choice. The narrator, Sam Knox is speaking about his Grandpa, who was in the Australian airforce during World War 11.

'He was only twenty years old. Grandpa said that half the airmen didn't come home.

*Lancasters. They could really fly. More than 4000 kilometres in one go, carrying a 7,000 pound bomb load. Lancs. They were fast. 460 kilometres per hour. That might not seem fast to you Sam, but it was then." Grandpa had told me about his famous Lancs before – the airmen, their missions, air battles. Sometimes he repeated himself but he always added something new, explained something more. "We could go higher than 24,000 feet." He moved back and forward sanding the glory box smooth. "Not much higher than that." He stopped to look at the smoothness of his work. I ran my hand over it. "There were always three gunners. I was one of them, sitting in a perspex bubble with a machine gun on the side of the plane. The gunners were the first target. Had to knock us out. The noise was deafening." Grandpa waited. He looked at me for a while. "I want to tell you this, because I'd didn't know it when I was a boy back then." He pointed to the familiar old black and white photograph hanging on the workshop wall. "That was my first Lanc. The first crew I flew with." There were seven airmen in the photo, three wearing peak airmen caps, two with pilot's hats and two with no hats and their hair slicked back. "They were my mates." He pointed to the second pilot and the Navigator. Then Grandpa waited as if gulping for air. "I didn't like the skipper at first," he pointed to a tall, lean man with a pilot's hat. "Jack Dawson. Came from Western Australia from a big station. Ran sheep. I thought he thought too much of himself. He was university educated. He didn't talk much. He stood apart from the rest of us. He'd already seen action in France." Grandpa stopped his work on the glory box and stood in front of his black and white photograph.*

*"Our mission was Cologne. Night bombing. The Lanc was fully loaded with bombs. There were German searchlights looking for us. Blue lights that attached to you so that we were targets for the twin-engined Messerschmitt 110's. Hated those blue lights and the Messerschmitts. Deadly. Then there was the ground cannon. There was so much*

*noise and smoke, planes down, bombing, fire. Jack took down our Lanc to 2000 feet, unloading bombs onto cities of people and falling buildings. Flak struck the Lanc, tore the guts out of the side. A shell exploded in the cockpit shattering the windscreen and the second pilot's leg but it was Jack who got the full blast of it." Grandpa put his heavy carpenter hands in front of his face as if to hide the image. "A shell ripped away his right eye and the skin of his face." It was a while before he started speaking again. "We were screaming and firing and trying to fix the damage. Jack lost consciousness and we plummeted 800 feet before he pulled the plane out of the dive. I don't know how he did. Even in that much pain, coughing blood, Jack has this strength. He was losing blood. A lot of blood and his face was half torn away. Bone and flesh and eyes.*

*Jack held that plane level, but we were low, lurching in the sky. Flak was still hitting us but Jack held onto that plane, crossing the English Channel in the dark. We couldn't land. Not enough fuel. Too much damage. One gunner was dead. We reached the English coastline. Jack could hardly speak. "Parachutes. Get out of here." There was so much blood. "An order."*

*We left Jack. Jumped. They found his body weeks afterwards, brought in with the tide on a beach.*

Grandpa was careful not to judge people too quickly after that. Grandpa told me that war is not brave, but men can be brave in war and in life.' (Chapter 14 in 'The Cave')

An example from 'Butterflies' of story journey and the challenge to think critically is the emotional response of the mother to her daughter's accident. The scene is in the hospital with the mother and Katherine, her baby daughter.

'Swollen eyelids shut tight. Head shaven bare. The woman strokes the baby's face. A seven year old girl holds onto the woman's skirt. A plastic tube feeds into the baby's nose and a drip is taped onto her arm. A catheter empties urine into a bag. Her arms are in splints. Her small body wrapped in gauze. Her hands are in mittens also tied to splints. She tries to open her eyes, searching through the swelling,

*The nurse comes to check tubes and vital signs.*

*The woman brushes back her dark wispy hair and looks up at the nurse. “What is wrong with that baby? Where is her hair?... Her face? ... Her body?”*

*“Remember the doctor spoke to you about it?” The nurse’s voice gently persists..*

*“Remember? Remember?”*

*“No. Spoke to me? No.”*

*“About her body, her face.” Pulling a chair close, the nurse sits next to her. “The baby will .... she will ..... look a little different.”*

*The woman stares confused at the nurse in her white uniform. “Where is Katherine? Where is my baby? My little girl?”*

*The nurse answers softly. “This is Katherine. You can see her.”*

*“But I can’t. I can’t .... see her. I can’t see her.”*

“Katherine, are you ready?” Mum calls as she comes into the house. She stops when she sees her daughter with her long brown hair flowing and the warmth of black velvet embracing her. “You look beautiful.”

“That’s what mothers are supposed to say.” (Chapter 5, ‘Butterflies’)

‘The new English Senior Secondary syllabuses reflect the fact that the world continues to change - socially, technologically and economically. The study of a wide range of spoken, written, visual, multimedia and performance texts remains central to the syllabuses. Students will continue to learn about themselves, the world and what it is to be human through the study of texts and language. The syllabuses will enable students to understand the structures and features of texts, the role of context in creating and interpreting texts and how texts can shape values and ideologies.’

(<http://wwwfp.education.tas.gov.au/English/default.htm> Education Department

Tasmania). Critical thinking is integral to the English curricula throughout Australia and is now encouraging a multi disciplinary and multi mediums approach.

My break through new YA novel, 'That's Why I Wrote This Song' has crossed into new ground through integrating music, technology, film in a collaborative cross-generational novel. My teenage daughter Tory Gervay, wrote the lyrics and music that drive the narrative, characters and themes. I wrote the book which incorporates her written lyrics. Tory's songs, 'Psycho Dad' and 'I Wanna Be Found' which she sang and recorded, can be downloaded from the web. The video clip of 'Psycho Dad' can also be downloaded. The book or music or video clip are all entry points into the experience of 'That's Why I Wrote This Song'.

'That's Why I Wrote This Song' is the journey of four sixteen-seventeen year old girls connected through music. It reveals their relationships with their fathers and how that impacts on their relationship with boys, each other and their lives. It explores the issue of identity in its varied aspects from dependence-independence, friendship, mother-daughter relationships, sexuality to promises and hopes, set against the real youth music scene. It invites critical thinking about father-daughter relationships; and music as the voice of youth.

Detailed Teaching Notes are available online from my website and the HarperCollins website for 'That's Why I Wrote This Song'.

Aristotle advocated reading fiction as a way to purge illness, leaving the reader healthier and sounder of mind. 'The Medicine Chest for the Soul', is found inscribed at the doorway of the medieval Abbey Library of St. Gall, in Switzerland. Story journey is a potent way to engage young people in critical thinking giving them invaluable insights into themselves and their world. I seek to write those books for young people.

## REFERENCES

Teaching Notes are available online through the websites:-

Susanne Gervay – [www.sgervay.com](http://www.sgervay.com)

HarperCollins – [www.harpercollins.com.au](http://www.harpercollins.com.au)

Susanne Gervay, *That's Why I Wrote This Song*, HarperCollins Publishers

Susanne Gervay *Butterflies* HarperCollins Publishers

Susanne Gervay *The Cave* HarperCollins Publishers

Susanne Gervay, *I Am Jack*, HarperCollins Publishers

Susanne Gervay *Super Jack*, HarperCollins Publishers

I Am Jack and Super Jack audio by Vocaleyes, Southern Scene :

[info@southernscene.com.au](mailto:info@southernscene.com.au)

Detailed teaching notes are available for a unit on 'I Am Jack' in:-

'I am Jack': Using Literature to Teach about Bullying by Jenny Foster, SCAN, The NSW Department of Education & Training Vol 21 No. 3 August 2002,

[www.det.nsw.edu.au/schoollibraries](http://www.det.nsw.edu.au/schoollibraries) available on Susanne Gervay's website

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