

# Longacre Press Teachers' Resource Kit

## A FISH *in the SWIM* of the WORLD

BEN BROWN

*'This is a book of memories. Some of them are my own. Some of them belong to others. They are as true and as fallible as any memories — distorted by time and distance and a writer's choice of words...'*

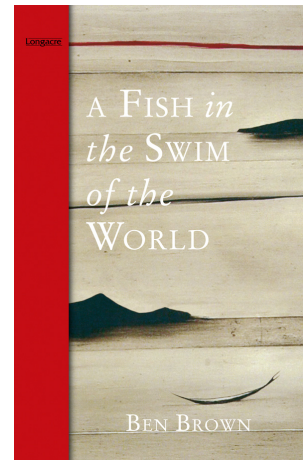
Ben Brown writes of that quintessentially New Zealand way of living that may not change the world or even ripple its waters, but is replete with meaning.

Gathered from the tobacco-green valleys of the Motueka River where he grew up during the 60s and 70s, Brown's memoir is rich with a sense of place, of family. The strands of his parents' lives reach from Outback Australia and the hardship years of the Great Depression and World War II, to the Waikato heart of the Kingitanga and a re-emergent people, to a time and place where 'tobacco was king' and a small farm by a river was the sum of all ambition.

Each story, each portrait, resonates with the dignity, warmth and understated humour of this fine new poetic voice.

### The Author

Ben Brown was born in Motueka in 1962. He's worked at various jobs; from tobacco farm labourer to research editor. He's the author of nine children's books; his wife, Helen Taylor, illustrates his books. Their *Fifty-Five Feathers* was short-listed for LIANZA 2005 Book Awards. He lives in Lyttleton.



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## Thoughts on A Fish.

I couldn't write *A Fish* when Dad was alive. I still don't really know why, though I have my suspicions... Certainly I had always (since getting serious about writing, anyway) intended to write the story of my parents, of the river, the valley, the tobacco years and so on. Early attempts at putting something together always fizzled out in frustration. They were fictions and they went nowhere. I'd sit down to write characters based on my mother and father, for instance, and find them morphing into caricatures, which didn't sit well. Or I'd begin by trying to write a place 'kind of like' the valley, give it a rubbish name, an imaginary river fed from made-up mountains, place people along its banks that I didn't know, doing things I didn't believe... a fool's errand, really. It's one of the golden rules, isn't it? If the writer can't believe it, no one else is going to. At other times in these early attempts at a fictional treatment, I'd be writing characters based on Dad or Ma or Big Dave Gorrill or whoever, and the 'real' characters kept coming through. It never occurred to me at the time that I could write them as such. I was younger then and thought about things differently.

Anyway, it was 1996 and a year or so after Ma's stroke. Helen and I were slowly miring ourselves in artistic destitution somewhere in the depths of industrial Sydenham (Christchurch) in a neat little double-brick workman's cottage that we couldn't quite

afford the rent on. Dad rang me up one day and said, 'I'll make a deal with you, come up and help run the place, take an income off it, live rent free, at least till we know what we're doing...' So we did.

We lived on the farm in a converted shed till Dad sold up. We worked the place with him. We watched my parents despair. I couldn't get my head around it for a while. I'd think to myself, this isn't right. They paid their dues. They lived good, honest lives. They owned nothing they didn't earn. They never bitched about what they didn't have. I never knew anyone who worked harder. There was value in a life like that. There was worth. Hell, to me, there was greatness, even if it does sound a bit naff. It pissed me off no end to see them like this.

We stayed on the farm for a little over a year, had a son there, but the folks were always going to sell, which as you know, they did. Helen and I found a place across the river from the farm. Dad and Ma moved to town. Dad used to say he never retired. He surrendered. I think he was pretty hard on himself sometimes.

Three years later Dad was gone. Helen and I had moved back to Christchurch a couple of weeks before. Bad time all round really. I think I went a bit nuts, actually. I was angry, which I am told is how some men express grief. Sounds like a fairly male reaction. Anyway, I got over it. Where am I going

with this? Well, around this time I remember thinking about my parent's life together. How the little cottage they'd built on the first farm had burnt down in the eighties a few years after they'd sold that farm. How the paddocks they'd planted out in tobacco for years were now rowed with olives, which was no bad thing, but to me, it was like that whole part of their lives was vanishing. Farms they'd worked on before they were married had lain fallow for years or had been carved up into lifestyle blocks. I was starting to look at the valley like it was some place else.

A digression. Orewa 1. You know, *that* speech. The one where Maori and Pakeha suddenly come from opposing planets and the whole place is going to hell in a handcart and for the next however many months afterwards editorial columns and letters to the Editor spew the same monotonous rubbish. None of it gelled with my experience. I'd think about how my parents lived and wonder, 'What are these people on about?' Okay, *The Fish* is NOT about Orewa. Another idea I'd been kicking around for years I'd called *The Halfcaste*, the title character to come from a mixed-race union, fumbling his way through an apparently troubled landscape looking for a nice fence to sit on. I started trying to write myself into the idea, but I think I ran out of rage. Good thing too. And again, the character of *The Halfcaste* was a fiction. But his parents were my own.

I found myself exploring my parents lives for the sheer pleasure of the reminiscence. I had children now, and it occurred to me that they would never really know their grandparents; never know their dignity and strength and determination... so maybe I could do something about that. A collection of stories, memories and reminiscences began to evolve. Here was a way to tell *the story*.

Another digression. I'm a fan of Dylan Thomas. 'The Salmon Sun', 'The Heron Priested Shore...' I recalled a line of his prose, 'The recollections of childhood have no order; of all those every-coloured and shifting scented shoals that move below the surface of the moment of recollection, one, two, indiscriminately, suddenly, dart up out of their revolving waters into the present air: immortal flying fish...'

Memories are distant things. They are there and they are not. They are ghosts. I recall, a couple of years ago visiting the bottom paddock on the first farm that Dad and Ma broke in – *Timatanga*. There is nothing left of my parents' life there. I wandered around for a while, remembering places I used to play when I was three or four or five years old. I imagined the whaleboat under its poplars. I watched my own little ghost there. It was a nice moment.

*Ben Brown*

# DISCUSSION/ESSAY TOPICS

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- Ben quotes his father as saying:  
*There was a fly... adrift on a ship made of camel dung in a puddle of camel piss in the middle of a desert, who thought he was Captain of the World.* (p 63)  
From this perspective, what is important in life? How does this idea relate to the text as a whole?
- *Life was a gamble if you were a farmer. Hail or wind or water could destroy a crop in a minute on any given day... But the sun would rise in the morning whether it rained or not, and the world would keep on spinning.* (p 18)  
Brown's narrative draws on images such as the flood on his parents' first farm, Arthur McGaveston's survival in a fire, and hailstorms in summer, wiping out some crops while not even touching others – 'like in a bloody raffle'. Considering these, and other examples from the text, make a case for what you think Brown holds accountable for this: Chance? Fate? Luck? God? Nature?
- Ben describes Nana Tuhi as weaving complex patterns 'as natural to her as breathing'. If this is cultural knowledge in a visible form, what does it imply for cultural knowledge that has no physical manifestation. Is cultural knowledge something you can see? Illustrate your answer with other examples from the text.
- How is the Maori way of life – on the Pa – similar and different to life on the tobacco farm? What would Turia Raihe (Mrs Julie Brown) have found familiar about this lifestyle, having come from the Waahi Pa?
- Ben Brown's description of the river valley paints the landscape as 'animated':  
*The Motueka River slides through the valley like a languid eel aisled in willowshade before its meeting with Tasman Bay and Kiwa's Great Ocean at Riwaka. Its head and feet are Te Tana Pukeko-whatu, a rangatira from the old days. The river is tapu. A taniwha sleeps there still.*  
Are there other examples of this kind of view of the landscape in the book? Does this perception of the landscape differ from the 'Pakeha view'? Do you think this has any implications for the difference in the way the cultures regard the land, historically and contemporarily? Has this culturally informed perception of the land influenced wider NZ society?
- One of the anecdotes Ben gives of his grandfather's life in Australia is of the job he had in wartime, repainting all the place names on signs along the railway line. What was the purpose of blanking out all the signs? What advantage does it give you to know where you are? How does inherent/ local knowledge of a landscape change the way you think about it, and how does this knowledge feature in *A Fish in the Swim ...*?
- The following passage describes Ben's reading of his father, Gordon Brown's daybook:  
*Same old, same old... This is a diarist's dilemma, to sift through the mundane in the record of days and raise up the residue somehow, to eke from the everyday blandness of things some kind of figurative truth so that the day is worth remembering in the first place.*  
How does this relate to Ben's narrative as a whole, and to the genre of memoir?

- This is a rather different kind of memoir, as it is not just personal, but also of a time, family, culture and, more broadly, a way of life that has all but disappeared. How does Brown pull a memoir as broad as this together? By placing his family's story amongst other people's, what does he achieve?
- Brown's narrative is vaguely chronological, though it is more the events/stories themselves that order the text. Is this not how memory itself works? Could Brown's book be described as a kind of 'memory map'? How does this differ from history and auto/biography?
- Brown's memoir is full of 'local legends' such as Kos flying a plane between the Peninsula Bridge and the river. In terms of the story does it matter if this is true or not? If something forms part of a narrative understanding of community, is there truth to it regardless of whether the event itself actually took place? Discuss.
- Write a comparative analysis of the following passages:

*In a cool curving world he lies  
And ripples with dark ecstasies.  
The kind luxurious lapse and steal  
Shapes all his universe to feel  
And know and be; the clinging stream  
Closes his memory, glooms his dream...*  
Rupert Brook, *The Fish*

*I heard all the myriad noises of the river as it ran through the valley and under the bridge, down to the murmur of water on stone and the slide of an eel in the darkness of the deep. I heard a tractor being thrashed somewhere in a paddock and the deafening clamour of cicadas and my own heart beating hammer and tongs and Stanley yelling, 'Get your arse down here, Bro!' And I jumped – of course I jumped! I jumped like a freed animal. I was a fish in the swim of the world. (Ben Brown, *A Fish in the Swim of the World*, p 97)*

- How does farming change throughout the course of the book. Use examples from the text to illustrate your answer.

- Brown's memoir is primarily focused on his core family group, though interspersed with this are stories of his extended family, friends and neighbours. Many of these stories are of those in some way unfortunate or lost: Jenny, Stanley, Crash ...

Do you think Brown has a particular purpose in illustrating an essentially family memoir with these stories?

- *Maybe everyone's got a madness in them somewhere. Maybe Crash would've flipped out regardless of whether his wife had left him. Maybe if she was ugly and stayed he would have been fine.*  
(p 124)

Do you think Brown holds chance or personality/attitude accountable for the way people's lives turn out? Relate your discussion to the text.

- To some degree, people become things of wonder in Brown's narrative. An example of this is his description of the Brethren (p 133). How, in his writing, does Brown invest the world with a slightly magic/poetic atmosphere? Does this owe to an evocation of childhood, or just his perspective?

- How does Brown move from distance, to an interior perspective of his subject? Investigate with examples from the text.

- How does Brown use the legendary element to mould/create/impose narrative? Is it an artificial construction used to make a definable narrative of real-life events?

- *'It always impressed me how many Maori priests managed to believe in so many gods and get away with it.'* (p 144)

How does the boarding school Ben is sent to merge Maori and Pakeha culture? How do Ben himself, and his family, merge these cultures? Use examples from the text.

- *Old Girl was like one of those images of Maori kuia that some people call romantic, with her headscarf and her long black dress and her cardigan with the sleeves pulled up, speaking her*

*hotchpotch of Maori and English, concerned that I was a runty bugger who needed fattening up, happy near to tears that her mokopuna was home for the weekend. But Old Girl was what she was. People like her have no pretence. (p 151)*

Brown's last sentence is interesting. Is this lack of pretence separate to the 'romantic' image of people such as Old Girl? Or is this lack of pretence what secures them as an iconic (and therefore potentially cliched) figure/image?

- *Life was not about overcoming; it was about getting up in the morning and doing whatever needed to be done. It was about working and eating and sleeping and playing occasionally and holding petty grudges and looking after kids and husbands and rarking up slackers and buying weekly golden kiwi tickets, and lotto when it came along, and tin-arsing a small win every couple of months... Life was just like death – mundane. (p 161)*

How does Brown's mother's philosophy (as he sees it), relate to the text as a whole, and to the genre of memoir.

- *When I was a kid I asked my mother about the land wars.*

*Matter of fact, she told me with a shrug, 'Pakeha took the land.'*

*I said, 'Dad's a Pakeha.'*

*She laughed. 'Neh! He's a bloody Australian!'*

*And don't you forget it,' said Dad.*

Why is it important to distinguish Australian from Pakeha? What do you think this difference means for the Brown family? At what other points in Brown's narrative does race become important? How important are ideas of race and/or culture to this book?

- Does Simon Kaan's painting on the front cover relate to the book in your opinion? Does the painting and the prose work together? Does the painting capture some of the essence of Ben Brown's prose?