

AT THE BIG RED ROOSTER

Stories by
William Taylor

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Ever had to be a pall bearer?
Gone pig hunting with a desperate uncle?
Had to dance with a giantess in public?
Had the world's most boring job?
Been ripped off by a little old lady?

This is a great collection of funny, sad, dramatic and sometimes frightening stories ideal for use in schools. Written in Taylor's distinctively lively and wry voice, these eleven stories are diverse in both style and content, with appeal for a range of readers.

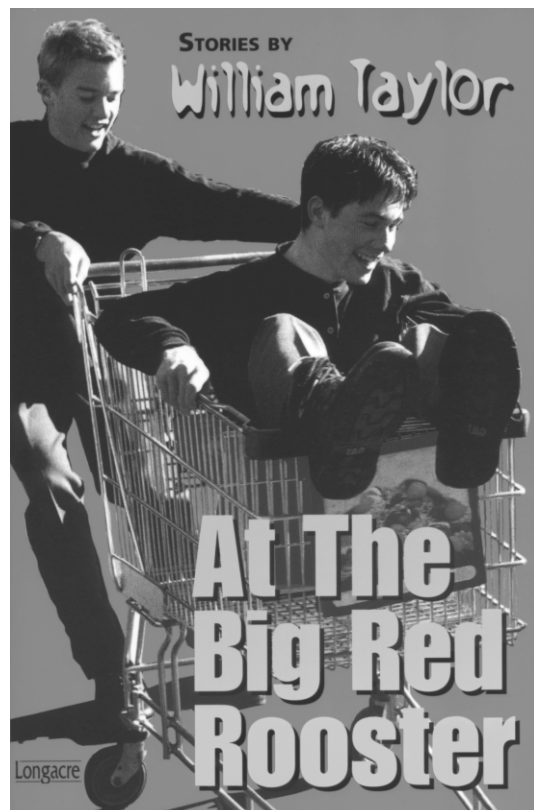
RESOURCEKIT for use in schools

linked to the English curriculum

Includes:

- a personal statement by author
- author's comment on each story
- individual, paired and group activities
- extension ideas and projects
- word scramble
- theatresports game
- further reading and resource list

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William Taylor writes...

When it came to writing, I was certainly a 'late bloomer'. Apart from quite perfunctory efforts during my primary, secondary and tertiary education – in other words, writing when I had to – I had done no creative writing at all until I sat down, at about age 30, and wrote my first novel. *Pieces in a Jigsaw* it was called, and it was one of six novels for adults that I wrote between 1970-74. Miraculously, all were published! None of them were very good and none of them were very bad – but they must certainly have come onto the NZ literary scene when there was a dearth of publishable material. I look, now, upon this period of my writing history as training for what was to come later – my work for children and young adults.

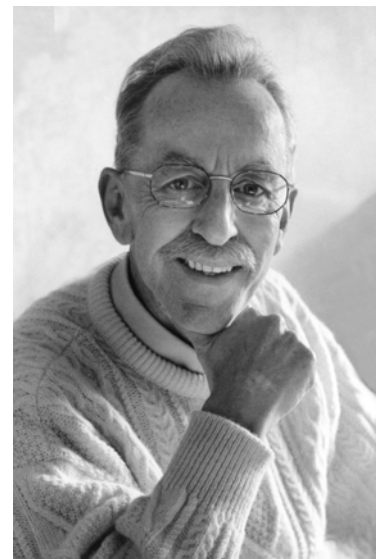
My writing career really got under way in 1981 with the publication of my first kids' book *Pack Up Pick Up & Off*. It was a successful novel. I have now written about thirty books for the young – some of which have been highly successful critically and some quite successful commercially. I enjoy my work. I may be getting old (I am now sixty) but, writing-wise, I am sure I am getting better. It may well be true to say that in this sense – as in many others – I am a slow-learner!

When I look back on my childhood years I have wonderful memories of books and reading. While my inherent laziness kept me from writing for a helluva long time, it certainly did not keep me from books. From a very early age I was an avid reader. If I were growing up today I wonder if I would be? I am sure that the easier options offered by television, video and computers would have lured me from books. I don't know.

One thing I do know, when I was growing up there were a couple of shortages young Kiwis do not experience today: stories written by New Zealanders for young New Zealanders – books in which we can see ourselves and our concerns reflected in the pages we read, and, secondly, books for young adults. As I grew into adolescence in the late 1940s, the term 'young adult' had yet to be invented and 'teenagers' tended to be a tribe that infested second-rate American movies! Definitely, people who are my age would all have moved from reading children's books (English or American) for, say, 10-12 year-olds, directly onto adult material.

I was a schoolteacher for over twenty years. The books I write today are very much written for the sort of kids I taught. In the fiction I write I do my best to reflect the world of the child or adolescent, their hopes and fears, joys, sadnesses and concerns. Sometimes I write seriously on serious issues. At other times I write humorous stories. Either way, I do hope I capture a little of the essence of what it is like to be young and growing up today.

At the Big Red Rooster is a collection of my short fiction. The stories span almost the whole period of my 30-year writing career. This collection is, in fact, an anthology of almost all my short fiction. I have, to date, written far more novels than I have short stories!



And now for a few comments about the individual stories in the collection:

At The Big Red Rooster

This story reflects a change common to the lives of most of us; the transition from school room to workforce. I remember my own 'transition' vividly – I moved directly from Form 5 at Paeroa District High School in 1954 to the back room of the ANZ Bank in the same town. While I did not quite blossom into a fully-fledged hoon, as does Brett in 'Rooster', there were marked similarities! I certainly spread my wings in ways that had previously been unimagined! Similar elements may be spotted in the last story of this collection!! Poor Brett's task of spraying old vegies with water to make them look like new vegies is the experience of a friend of mine who started work in a large Hamilton vegetable mart only a few years back. HE is Brett!

Uncle Mick & The Great Outdoors

Not too long back I was asked to write a story for a collection of sport short fiction for young readers. Because I am quite well-known as the worst skier in the world, and live near a ski-field, I was asked to write a story on skiing. I agreed – providing I was allowed to add pig-hunting to the story. Eyebrows were raised at the impossibility of such a combination. I think I succeed quite admirably. The bit about standing on the poor pig is based on experience; my first pig hunt – very soon after I started work in the back room of the ANZ Bank in Paeroa.

A Man's Estate

I was a pallbearer for the very first time at the age of 19 – my Great-aunt Emma's funeral. I wore a suit. I sweated. I was scared. What the hell would happen if I dropped my bit of the bloody coffin? In the event I performed perfectly. The thought of the likely retribution of the deceased – a formidable lady who had been a nurse during the Boer War – was enough to keep me on course.

Tina & Sharon & Myra & Vi on a Saturday Night

There are two stories in this collection that relate inter-generational issues; this one and 'Three Women'. The casts of both stories are wholly female – and this is uncommon in my writing. I am glad that both stories appear in this book because they date from both ends of my writing career with 'Tina & Sharon...' being by far the more recent. In this story I explore a different method of getting the tale across. I guess this

isn't too important in itself but I did find it a handy technique for this particular story where I am endeavouring to explore the natural conflicts of interest between generations. My sympathies in this story lie very much with poor Myra, number three in the pecking order – and with very little to look forward to on this particular Saturday night. The story also contains one of my favourite lines (if I am allowed one from my own work!) – where Vi details quite precisely where she considers young males keep their brains!!

Mrs Peters

A sweet little story about a greedy old lady. Not all old people are nice. I should know; I'm getting old myself!!

The Man of The (Haunted) House

Frequently during my writing career I have explored both sides of my own character in the same story. I do so in this tale. I know that I am poor, gullible 'Mickey Mouse' who gets lead, literally, down the garden path to the pool of blood. A little bit of me is also 'Staunch', the teller of the horrifying tale. In all truth, though, I have always wanted to be Staunch – but have ended up as Mickey. I also think that in this story I do something that is not often achieved in New Zealand fiction – I prove that a front-row forward may also have a highly imaginative and creative side to his nature!

Three Women

This is the first short story I ever wrote. It was runner-up for the Katherine Mansfield short story award in 1971. I was inordinately proud when the literary periodical, *Landfall* asked to publish it. Indeed I was amazed! I still have the original of the story; it was tied up with a length of pink ribbon. The ribbon has now faded to white. I guess I am still proud of my effort; a soft, somewhat muted and sad tale of an old lady remembering. I was young when I wrote 'Three Women'. I wonder if I would write it any differently almost thirty years later?

The Third Day

It wasn't his first day at the school that was hardest for poor Samoan immigrant Joshua. It took three days for him to be led astray. It's not easy, when you are different and everything looks strange, to become accepted, be 'one of the boys'. Sometimes a price has to be paid. I remember, soon after I started teach-

ing, I taught a ‘Joshua’. He was delightful. He survived a very rough and ready introduction to our society. I vividly recall his turning up to go on a school camp I had organised; lugging along behind him an enormous suitcase, inside of which was one neatly folded pair of pyjamas – and his cut lunch. ‘The Third Day’ is my most popular piece of short fiction for young readers and has been published in numerous collections all over the world.

Tradesman’s Rates

This is a true story. While I tell it in the first person, it was told to me by someone else. I did, however, know the old guy very slightly – an unlikely looking character for such a fascinating background. I think it helped me to realise that we all, from time to time, stereotype old people. Not every ancient we come across has trudged miles to school barefoot through the snow before trudging home to churn cream into butter – by hand!

The Gift

I can only think I must have had a ghastly few days in the classroom prior to writing ‘The Gift’! It is one of my older short stories; you can spot this in a couple of places – ‘inspectors’, as such, are a thing of the past and I am sure there is not a staffroom in the country, these days, where smoking is allowed! I certainly continue to remember a few ‘Miss Hawkes’ of my acquaintance and I guess I must have wished I had been blessed with ‘the gift’ in order to deal with them in such satisfying fashion! Certainly I do remember becoming a somewhat trendy ‘expert’ in ‘teaching’ movement and mime. Sadly, I was never blessed with such a malleable class as the one in ‘The Gift’ – just think what marvellous havoc I could have wrought!

The Supper Waltz

Not very long ago I was asked to write a short story based either on my own first sexual experience OR on the first sexual experience of someone else. Naturally, I chose to write about someone else! It is strange, very strange: I am not, of course, either Brett in ‘At the Big Red Rooster’ or Richard in ‘The Supper Waltz’. I wonder why it is, then, that a shiver can still run up and down my spine whenever I remember Wilma Dorff. Forty-five years on and I can still see her. She comes to mind very particularly when, occasionally on my travels, I drive past the old hall where the Saturday dances were once held... and where Wilma’s several wedding receptions were held, even though the actual weddings had been aborted!

SCRAMBLES (Comprehension exercise)

The following questions have one or two word answers, but the answers are scrambled below. See how many words you can unscramble correctly.

1. Name the person whose fat thigh and body odour is too close to the narrator in the funeral in ‘A Man’s Estate’? (two words)

DAYDEFTT

2. What type of dog does Uncle Mick have to take along on the pig hunt for his girlfriend in ‘Uncle Mick and the Great Outdoors’?

OLDPOE

3. What is the Big Red Rooster?

METRUSPREAK

4. What is the ‘spidery brown-black contraction’ Old Tom shows the narrator in ‘Tradesman’s Rates’? (two words)

JACKPORST

5. What department does Lisa become the youngest ever supervisor of? (two words)

GOOSESLOOD

6. What is the name of the child in ‘Three Women’?

RESNYHR

EXTENSION IDEAS AND PROJECTS

7. What do Glen and Shane try to get Joshua to do in 'The Third Day'?

HILPFOST

8. What did Janie use to call the big pine tree in 'Three Women'?

STELAC

9. Who tells Mick that a witch was killed on the grounds of his new house in 'The Man of the Haunted House'?

HANUSCT

10. What is the first thing that Mrs Peters buys? (two words)

MERNACCULUVAE

11. Tina has replaced Greg with whom by the end of 'Tina & Sharon & Myra & Vi on a Saturday Night'?

ARNEDR

12. What is the Gift?

SYNPHOIS

13. Name the person who rescues Richard from the terrifying Wilma Dorff in 'The Supper Waltz'.

LEREM

Answers
1. Fat Teddy 2. poodle 3. supermarket
4. jock strap 5. loose goods 6. Sherryn
7. shoplift 8. Castle 9. Staunch 10. vacuum
cleaner 11. Darren 12. hypnosis 13. Merle

Writing

You are going to form a band. Pick the other members of your band from characters in any of the stories in *At The Big Red Rooster*. Then write a song that could believably come out of your common experience.

Listening

Ask the class to be very silent while you read 'The Gift' aloud to them. After listening to it, get the students to write down what they would do if they discovered they had the 'gift'.

Read the responses to each other in pairs and discuss.

Presenting

In either groups, pairs or individuals, choose a story from *At The Big Red Rooster* and create a visual response to the story. Make sure there are no words that indicate which story it is.

Viewing

Display the work above and ask the rest of the class to decide which story they think each piece is inspired by, and why.

Writing/Speaking

Divide the class into groups. Each group chooses (or draws lots for) a story from *At The Big Red Rooster*. They then convert it to a play format and perform it in front of the class.

Viewing/Speaking

Watch each performance and discuss the difference between the short story and play forms. What is lost? What is gained?

Writing

Choose a story from *At The Big Red Rooster*. Then, using a similar style and approach, write your own story about something similar. (eg; an outdoor experience that goes wrong for 'Uncle Mick and the Great Outdoors'; a story with a twist for 'Mrs Peters'; a dialogue record of a night at home for 'Tina & Sharon & Myra & Vi on a Saturday Night' etc.)

or...

Take characters and/or situations from two different stories in *At the Big Red Rooster*, and blend them together into a new story. (eg; ‘Man of the Haunted House’ meets ‘Tina & Sharon & Myra & Vi on a Saturday Night’). Try to keep the characters true to what you know of them.

SPEAKING Stand Up and Talk!

Each student has three minutes to talk about one of the following in front of the class. See how fluent you can be!

1. ‘My favourite story in *At the Big Red Rooster* is...’ Deliver a three-minute review of the story you enjoyed the most.
2. Speak for three minutes on William Taylor’s writing style. Give examples to back up your assertions.
3. ‘Short stories are harder to write than novels.’ True or false? Argue your case for three minutes.
4. ‘Short stories are more interesting to read than novels.’ True or false? Argue your case for three minutes.
5. ‘It’s good to read about New Zealand characters in New Zealand settings.’ Do you agree? Present your case.

THEATRESPORTS

Get three to four volunteers at a time to take the stage for theatresports – rotate one actor with a new volunteer after each game. Another student (or the teacher) is the MC.

Using the characters and stories from *At The Big Red Rooster* the students are going to act out improvised scenes.

The MC asks the audience for suggestions as to characters from *At the Big Red Rooster* stories they would like to see on stage – eg; Wilma Dorff, Staunch, The Hawk, Uncle Mick etc. The MC chooses and directs each actor to be a certain character.

Then the audience members suggest a situation (also from stories in *At The Big Red Rooster*) that they would like to see acted – eg; pallbearer at a funeral, school dance, working at the supermarket, first time skiing, discovering hypnosis, shoplifting etc. The MC selects one, and tells the actors.

The actors must act out the characters and scene, making the best story they can of it while keeping in character.

Remember, theatresports is the ‘yes’ game – the key is to not ‘block’ the other actors’ suggestions, but take on board every initiative.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

William Taylor is a New Zealand writer. Can you tell that from his stories, or could they be about characters anywhere, written by somebody from anywhere? Use examples to back up your point of view.

The stories in *At The Big Red Rooster* feature several stereotypes of characters. To what extent does William Taylor use stereotypes, and to what extent does he subvert them? Use examples to back up your case.