

'Scary and unforgettable...
A brave and unsettling account.'

TIM WINTON

Lech Blaine

Car Crash

a memoir

Lech Blaine

Teaching notes

BY ERNEST PRICE

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Section A

Synopsis and learning activities for before reading

SYNOPSIS

Lech Blaine's *Car Crash* provides an opportunity for students to consider the complex ways in which our identities are shaped. Centred on Blaine's experience in a horrific car accident as a teenager, the text radiates out to consider the intersection of family histories, personal journeys and cultural norms. The narrator is unflinchingly vulnerable, even as he considers what it is that may prevent us from revealing the truths about ourselves to those we hold close.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES FOR BEFORE READING

- ◆ What are the connotations of the book's title?
- ◆ What have been some of the approaches to minimising road fatalities in Australia? Consider campaigns prepared by the Transport Accident Commission over the last thirty years. A starting point for discussion could be [this analysis](#) from Robin Hicks in 2012. This article also provides links to a number of the television advertisements screened during this period.

- ◆ Blaine takes care to situate the events of his life within the context of the development of Australian society. Students could consider:
 - ▶ the politics of the Liberal, National and Labor parties in Australia
 - ▶ the politics of Pauline Hanson's One Nation
 - ▶ the demographics of Toowoomba
 - ▶ the Toowoomba floods of 2011.
- ◆ The book's epigraph is written in the form of a dictionary definition, highlighting some of the key themes of the text. Why might Blaine have chosen this form for the epigraph?

Section B

Learning activities for reading

ACT I: THE BYSTANDER

- ◆ What are the implications of the title 'The Bystander'?
- ◆ How does the quote from John Ashbery frame a reader's understanding of the first section of the text?
- ◆ 'Black Hole in the High Beams'
 - ▶ What are the implications of the title 'Black Hole in the High Beams'?
 - ▶ Why does Blaine emphasise the contrast between dreams and reality in this chapter?
 - ▶ How does Blaine establish the setting of the text in this chapter?
 - ▶ Identify three examples of imagery from this chapter. What emotions may they evoke for the reader?
 - ▶ The readers are introduced to Lech's parents in this opening chapter. What are your initial impressions of these characters?
- ◆ 'iGrief'
 - ▶ What are the implications of the title 'iGrief'?
 - ▶ How does Blaine establish the contrast between his response to the crash and the response of others?
 - ▶ Why does Blaine emphasise the terms 'critical', 'serious' and 'stable'?
 - ▶ Blaine notes, 'My iPhone was a bright light to be blinked at, until the blank minutes became days and nights of missing time.' What role does social media play in this chapter?
 - ▶ How does Blaine characterise his interview with the local newspaper?
- ◆ 'Terrible Perfection'
 - ▶ What are the implications of the title 'Terrible Perfection'?
 - ▶ What impression does Blaine give of Hamish's funeral?
 - ▶ Why was Melissa disappointed with Lech's eulogy for Henry?
 - ▶ Blaine writes, 'Young men exhaled through quivering noses, mouths closed, afraid of the sounds that might emerge if they opened them.' How does Blaine explore masculinity in this chapter?

- ◆ 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Larrikin'
 - ▶ What are the implications of the title 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Larrikin'?
 - ▶ How does Blaine characterise his mother as a younger woman?
 - ▶ How does Blaine characterise his father as a younger man?
 - ▶ Identify three examples of Australian idiom used in this chapter. What do each of these sayings mean?
 - ▶ What characteristics does Blaine feel that he inherited from each of his parents? How do they contribute to his identity?
- ◆ 'Blank Volcanoes'
 - ▶ What are the implications of the title 'Blank Volcanoes'?
 - ▶ How does Blaine react to the dissolution of his family in 2007?
 - ▶ What aspects of Blaine's identity were changing at this point in his life?
 - ▶ What kind of connection is Lech able to build with Frida? How is this different to the other relationships that he has had?

ACT II: THE GRADUATE

- ◆ What are the implications of the title 'The Graduate'?
- ◆ How does the quote from William Shakespeare frame a reader's understanding of the first section of the text?
- ◆ 'Class Excursions'
 - ▶ What are the implications of the title 'Class Excursions'?
 - ▶ Identify three examples of metaphors or similes in this chapter. Explain their meaning.
 - ▶ Why does Blaine find the 'continuing ordinariness' so 'shocking'?
 - ▶ How has the car crash served as a catalyst in Lech's life?
 - ▶ What role does dialogue play in creating an understanding of Lech's relationships?
- ◆ 'Guilty Parties'
 - ▶ What are the implications of the title 'Guilty Parties'?
 - ▶ Why might Blaine transpose excerpts from the media throughout the text?
 - ▶ What is the impact of Lech being 'expected to remember and then forget'?
 - ▶ How does Blaine use the literary device of rhetorical questions throughout the text?
- ◆ 'Rebel with a Stress Disorder'
 - ▶ What are the implications of the title 'Rebel with a Stress Disorder'?
 - ▶ How does Blaine's description of the changing seasons frame the chapter?
 - ▶ Why does Blaine feel that 'something structural' in his soul broke at the fundraiser?
 - ▶ What 'performance anxiety' is Lech suffering from in this chapter?
 - ▶ Why did Schoolies Week 'nearly kill' Lech?

- ◆ 'Fast Nights, Dark Days'
 - ▶ What are the implications of the title 'Fast Nights, Dark Days'?
 - ▶ What was your initial response to Blaine's admission of reckless driving in this chapter?
 - ▶ Blaine writes, 'My sleep disorder became an art form.' Why does Lech struggle to sleep?
 - ▶ How does the repetition of the word 'guilt' shape the reader's understanding in this chapter?

ACT III: THE SURVIVOR

- ◆ What are the implications of the title 'The Survivor'?
- ◆ How does the quote from Amy Hempel frame a reader's understanding of the first section of the text?
- ◆ 'Solidarity Forever'
 - ▶ What are the implications of the title 'Solidarity Forever'?
 - ▶ How does Blaine characterise the changing nature of Glenvale?
 - ▶ Why does Lech want a diagnosis of a significant mental health issue?
 - ▶ How may Blaine's explanation of his father's backstory deepen a reader's understanding of the relationship between the two?
 - ▶ In what ways is Lech's sense of identity continuing to evolve?
- ◆ 'Performance Anxiety'
 - ▶ What are the implications of the title 'Performance Anxiety'?
 - ▶ How does Blaine feel that his privilege shapes the court's decision?
 - ▶ How does Blaine characterise Christopher?
 - ▶ What response did you have to Christopher's observations about Lech?
 - ▶ Why does Blaine present so much of this chapter as a dialogue between Lech and Christopher?
- ◆ 'Unmotherly'
 - ▶ What are the implications of the title 'Unmotherly'?
 - ▶ What is the significance of Lech's mother gluing his father's face over his?
 - ▶ Did your impression of Lech's mother change in this chapter?
 - ▶ How does Blaine characterise Vincent in this chapter?
- ◆ 'Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain'
 - ▶ What are the implications of the title 'Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain'?
 - ▶ How does Blaine describe his interaction with Frida at the New Year's Eve party?
 - ▶ What does the exchange between Lech and Frida over 'arancini balls' reveal about their differing social status?
 - ▶ How does the weather play a figurative role in this chapter?
- ◆ 'The Soul Is a Black Box'
 - ▶ What are the implications of the title 'The Soul Is a Black Box'?
 - ▶ How does Lech's visit to Tim shift his perspective?

- ▶ What is the intended effect of including the newspaper headlines in this chapter?
- ▶ Why is it important to Lech that he is not ‘just a survivor’ in Vincent’s eyes?
- ▶ What role does Billie play for Lech?
- ▶ How does Blaine present the ‘molecular level’ of grief?

Section C

Learning activities for after reading

1. THEMES

A. The ‘velocity’ of grief

Blaine explores the way that grief, and the inability to connect with his own grief, drives his life in the aftermath of the accident. Throughout the text he explores the ways in which there can be a distinction between performative, public experiences of grief and an individual’s private capacity to engage with their response to trauma.

In chronicling the community’s response to the accident, Blaine reflects the way that social and cultural norms shape the grieving process. Here he touches on the ritualistic approach to grief dominant in many communities, as individuals place an emphasis on notions of closure, sought through landmark events such as funerals, wakes and court cases.

As he ultimately begins to reconcile his experiences of the accident with the help of a psychologist, Blaine realises that his grief extends beyond the catalyst of the accident to include his response to the dissolution of his parents’ marriage. Again Blaine reflects the complexity of grief, and the way that it can trigger memories of past experiences. This is reflected in the reaction Blaine’s mother has to her separation from Lech’s father.

B. The trauma of survival

From the opening of the memoir it is clear that much of Blaine’s experience is dominated by the intensity of survivor’s guilt. Throughout the text this is a process that is driven both by Lech’s reactions to the events unfolding around him and by the expectations placed on him by his family, friends and the media.

Lech consistently measures his worthiness against the spectre of his survival and the tragedy of his friends’ deaths and injuries. He reckons with developing a sense of self that is defined by more than his role in the accident.

Alongside his personal journey he is consistently reminded, by well-meaning people and scandal-hungry media alike, of the contrast between his fate and that of his friends. This social pressure makes it difficult for him to reckon with his own sense of responsibility for the horrific accident.

C. The ‘ghoulish fascination [of] observers’

Throughout the text Blaine inserts newspaper headlines, text messages and posts from social media to signify the weight held by observers to the accident. Beginning with the bystanders who stop to help in the immediate aftermath of the crash, Lech is plagued by those with a tenuous connection to events.

This disconnect between the way the event is constructed online and the reality of Lech’s experience only serves to exacerbate the difficulties of exploring his own grief and guilt. The media’s sensationalist impulses, the rumours circulating online and the chatter throughout the town provide little respite from Lech’s sense of the accident’s significance.

D. The modern complications of masculinity

Blaine’s narration of events before and after the accident illustrate the significant role that cultures of masculinity had in his upbringing. From the emphasis his father and brothers place on sporting prowess and bravery to the role that sexual conquests play for his peers, Blaine is exposed to specific and definitive ideas about masculinity.

These understandings of masculinity, shaped by a broader cultural emphasis on sport and sexuality, serve to both connect the communities that Lech is part of and limit their capacity to absorb the grief and shock of the accident. As he undergoes the process of grieving, Blaine begins to question and problematise his own sense of masculinity and the way he engages with both friends and family.

E. A lifelong identity crisis

Flowing from his deepening understanding of masculinity, Blaine reflects on the development of his identity. Through the use of flashbacks, Blaine characterises the relationships pivotal to his sense of self – those with his family and friends.

Prior to and immediately following the accident, Blaine continues to view his identity as a wrestle between a dichotomy of ‘poet’ and ‘larrikin’. It is after he has engaged with his grief and guilt that he begins to break down this binary, and accept that his identity may contain these seeming opposites. In accepting his own complexity he is able to see the same in others, most notably his mother and father.

F. The only cure is vulnerability

As he battles to develop an adult identity against the backdrop of the accident, Lech adopts dissociation as a primary coping mechanism. Pushed to the brink by his deteriorating mental health and the impacts of self-medicating with alcohol, Lech’s engagement with psychological help sees him able to meaningfully confront his experiences without the glare of the public.

Working with Christopher, Lech is able to dismantle some of the barriers holding back his feelings. These barriers have served him largely as a coping mechanism. They also reflect the core ideas of masculinity shown to Lech as a young person in Toowoomba. Making himself more vulnerable, first to himself and then to others, marks a significant moment in Lech’s journey.

2. TEXT FEATURES

A. Form and structure

- ◆ Blaine's use of the **memoir form** gives readers insight into a complex world of grief and guilt through the prism of his individual experiences. The text uses all the hallmarks of literary fiction, but is framed around his real experiences. This provides an avenue for readers to connect with all the nuances of his story.
- ◆ The text is structured in a series of three **acts**, with each act containing a series of **chapters**. These **acts** reflect the evolution of Blaine's sense of self, particularly in relation to his understanding of the accident. The **chapters** highlight significant elements of Blaine's experience, shaping the reader's thematic understanding of the text.
- ◆ The text is **non-linear**, allowing Blaine to flashback to significant moments in the history of his family and friends. This acts to contextualise the accident within Blaine's broader experience, moving beyond the notion that it was the only event of significance for Blaine, or that he can be defined solely by this experience.
- ◆ Blaine inserts **excerpts** from text messages, social media and newspapers throughout the text. This acts to deepen the reader's understanding of the external pressures on Lech as he battles to deal with his grief in the wake of the accident.

B. Narrative voice

- ◆ Blaine's choice of vocabulary is complex, reflecting both the poet and the larrikin. He makes substantial use of Australian **idiom**, both in characterising his parents and in reflecting his social identity. He also makes significant use of **figurative language** to create a dark and foreboding atmosphere in the text.
- ◆ As in any memoir, there are questions about the **reliability** of Blaine's narration. He is at times his own greatest critic, relentlessly questioning his own worth, particularly in the wake of the accident. While this may not provide the most accurate and objective record of events, it is of course invaluable in providing insight into the psychological impact of Blaine's experiences.
- ◆ At times, particularly at the ends of chapters, Blaine makes use of **short sentences** and **repeats** key vocabulary. This acts to reinforce the layers of complexity in Blaine's experiences, and the circular thinking that is a hallmark of his response to trauma.

C. Characterisation

- ◆ Blaine peppers the text with **dialogue**, which acts to establish the core traits of individual relationships, along with the nature of relationships between characters.

- ◆ The use of **excerpts** from social media and text messages also establishes Lech's public persona and the personas constructed by some of the key characters in the text. This enables Blaine to emphasise the gap between performative experiences of grief and private efforts to grapple with trauma.

D. The figurative level

- ◆ **Metaphors** and **similes** play a significant role in Blaine's reconstruction of his experience of grief. He uses them in a range of contexts, both as expressions of idiom that reflect his family's class background and as more traditionally poetic expressions of mood.
- ◆ The **weather** plays a significant role throughout the text, in both a literal and a figurative sense. Blaine establishes the context of his narrative by focusing on the changing seasons and difficult climate in Toowoomba, and chronicles the resolution of a chapter of his life against the extremes of the Toowoomba floods in 2011.
- ◆ Blaine uses **imagery** to convey the significance of the landscape on the characters in the text. It shapes the development of their individual and collective identities, and is a factor in the decisions they make.

3. EXTENDED ANALYTICAL RESPONSES

Students may be asked to respond analytically to *Car Crash*. Some possible essay questions include the following.

- ◆ 'Car Crash shows that there is no such thing as closure.' Discuss.
- ◆ To what extent is Lech driven by survivor's guilt?
- ◆ 'The media acts as a barrier to healing in *Car Crash*.' Do you agree?
- ◆ 'Toxic masculinity creates many of the problems Lech faces.' Discuss.
- ◆ The figure of Lech's father looms large over the text. To what extent does Lech reject his father's traditional ideals of masculinity?
- ◆ 'Lech was destined for a "lifelong identity crisis".' Do you agree?
- ◆ To what extent does grief shape Lech's family?
- ◆ How does the use of excerpts from the media deepen the reader's understanding in *Car Crash*?
- ◆ 'The performance of grief restricts healing.' Discuss.
- ◆ 'Blaine establishes that healing is not a linear process.' Do you agree?

Teaching Notes by Ernest Price

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