



**GROWING
UP IN
COUNTRY
AUSTRALIA**

EDITED BY RICK MORTON

Teaching Notes

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Section A

Synopsis and learning activities for before reading

SYNOPSIS

Growing Up in Country Australia spotlights the incredible range of experiences that young people have in rural and regional settings. The cruel beauty of the land is on full display throughout the collection, dictating the lives of individuals, families and communities. Against this often unpredictable backdrop, young people struggle with the intersection of issues connected to class, race, gender and sexuality. The writers wrestle with the paradox at the heart of their communities: they are simultaneously made safe and suffocated by the ever-watching eyes of families and friends. This collection gives students everywhere a chance to understand what it means to come of age in the furthest corners of this vast land.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES FOR BEFORE READING

- ♦ What are the connotations of the title of the collection *Growing Up in Country Australia*?
- ♦ How may the term 'Country' be understood differently by First Nations people?

- ◆ How has population distribution in rural and regional Australia changed over the period since European colonisation? Students may use census data to develop their understanding.
- ◆ What political forces are at play in rural and regional Australia? Ask students to consider the politics and policies of the National Party in particular.
- ◆ In what ways do weather and climate define life in rural and regional Australia? Ask students to consider climatic maps of the continent, and to compare these to population distribution.

Section B

Questions for reading

INTRODUCTION

- ◆ What are the differences that Rick Morton sees between the media in cities and small towns?
- ◆ Why does Morton emphasise the recurrence of the ‘same names’ in his hometown?
- ◆ What is ‘the country Australia bargain’?
- ◆ How does Morton understand the notion of ‘growing up’?
- ◆ What are some of the themes that Morton identifies throughout the collection?

‘SLOW LIFE’ BY SAMI SHAH

- ◆ How does Sami Shah characterise the city of Karachi?
- ◆ What connection does Shah make between the town of Northam and Australia’s colonial history?
- ◆ Why does the silence of Northam have such a significant impact on Shah?
- ◆ How does Shah feel that he changed as a result of his time in Northam?
- ◆ What parallels does Shah make between his experience in Northam and life under lockdown?

‘MOUSEPOCALYPSE’ BY ANNABEL CRABB

- ◆ What are the ‘brutal lessons’ that Annabel Crabb feels farms teach young people?
- ◆ Why is Crabb interested in the idea of ‘petrichor’?
- ◆ What role does Crabb feel luck plays in the country?
- ◆ How does Crabb use sensory description in her piece?
- ◆ Why does Crabb believe there is tension between the city and the country?

‘THE HUNTER’ BY JOO-INN CHEW

- ◆ Why does Joo-Inn Chew open ‘The Hunter’ with a short sentence outlining the weather?
- ◆ What are the connotations of a ‘muddy oasis’?
- ◆ How do you interpret the family relationships in this piece?
- ◆ What parallels does Chew draw between Malacca and the setting of the piece?
- ◆ What is the significance of the image of the hunter?

‘A NEW HOME’ BY FIONA WHITE

- ◆ Why does Fiona White open the piece with reference to Australia as a ‘hard-baked land’?
- ◆ Why does White see migration as ‘simple and complicated’?
- ◆ What is the significance of White’s family choosing to transport Nimbus to Australia?
- ◆ How does White imagine Australia looks through Nimbus’s eyes?
- ◆ What is the significance of both White and Nimbus coming to call Australia home?

‘GRAFTON’S DERRY QUEEN’ BY BRIDIE JABOUR

- ◆ Why was Bridie Jabour’s mother a ‘minor town celebrity’?
- ◆ What impact did this public profile have on Jabour’s sense of self?
- ◆ Why did Jabour’s grandfather feel an ‘obligation’ to the community?
- ◆ What does Jabour see as a unique feature of the relationships in a small town?
- ◆ How did Jabour’s understanding of community influence her growth as a person?

‘Q & A’ WITH TONY ARMSTRONG

- ◆ How does Tony Armstrong characterise the ‘hierarchy in country buses’?
- ◆ What are the implications of Armstrong’s reference to ‘farm-strong kids’?
- ◆ What role does Armstrong believe football played in his town?
- ◆ Why does Armstrong now believe that the gender roles on display in his town may have been ‘problematic’?
- ◆ How were Armstrong’s friendships affected by living in a small town?

‘BACKSTAGE’ BY LAURA JEAN MCKAY

- ◆ How does Laura Jean McKay characterise life on a farm?
- ◆ What are the implications of McKay’s reference to ‘The Farmer’?
- ◆ Why does rain play a big role in the household?
- ◆ Why does McKay make reference to the ‘Brayakaulung stories’?
- ◆ What is a ‘flailing farm’?

‘THE COUNTRY CLUB’ BY LECH BLAINE

- ◆ Why does Lech Blaine juxtapose ‘tiny Wondai’ with ‘the metropolis of Toowoomba’?
- ◆ What are the implications of Blaine calling Toowoomba the ‘murder capital of Australia’?
- ◆ What role do drugs play in Blaine’s piece?
- ◆ How do ideas of masculinity influence Blaine’s understanding of the world?
- ◆ How are the characters in the piece divided by social class?

‘GRASS IN THE WIND’ BY TIM BOCQUET

- ◆ Why does Tim Bocquet emphasise the phenomenon of being ‘caught between’?
- ◆ What are the implications of an ‘immigrant paddock’?
- ◆ Why does Bocquet note that the ‘history of the land was white’?
- ◆ How does Bocquet characterise each family member’s dreams?
- ◆ What is the importance of Bocquet’s relationship with the land?

‘RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY’ BY M.A. PLAZZER

- ◆ What are the implications of M.A. Plazzer’s reference to ‘real rain’?
- ◆ What roles do pubs play in Plazzer’s understanding of Jeparit?
- ◆ Why is the weather ‘both oracle and lifeline’?
- ◆ How does Plazzer see the role of water in Jeparit?
- ◆ What is the significance of Plazzer’s speculation that Jeparit may be considered ‘developing’?

‘1983’ BY OLIVIA GUNTARIK

- ◆ Why does Olivia Guntarik compare Bendigo to a ‘colourless moonscape’?
- ◆ What did the threat of snakes represent to a young Guntarik?
- ◆ Why may Bev have struggled in ‘living with difference’?
- ◆ What role does fire play in Guntarik’s piece?
- ◆ How does Guntarik characterise the experience of being Asian in Bendigo in the 1980s?

‘BOB’ BY MICHAEL WINKLER

- ◆ Why does Michael Winkler believe egalitarianism is ‘one of the persistent myths of Australia’?
- ◆ How does Winkler characterise the social and economic hierarchy of Australia?
- ◆ Why does Winkler believe First Nations people may have been ‘hiding in plain sight’ in his town?
- ◆ What is the significance of the priest’s attitude towards Bob Weems?

- ◆ Why does Winkler focus on the ‘meaningless deaths’ from the town of his youth?

‘BINDOON’ BY SAM ELKIN

- ◆ Why was Sam Elkin drawn to the rural exchange program?
- ◆ What barriers did Mrs Waller perceive to Elkin’s participation in the program?
- ◆ What role does social class play in Elkin’s experiences?
- ◆ How does the history of the Catholic Church shape Bindoon?
- ◆ What legacy does Bindoon leave in Elkin’s life?

‘INSIDE THOSE LEAFY WALLS’ BY JO GARDINER

- ◆ What was unique about Jo Gardiner’s experience of a one-teacher school?
- ◆ How did Gardiner experience time while horse riding?
- ◆ Why was Gardiner eager to follow her father’s command to ‘listen’?
- ◆ What did the encounter with the deer reveal to Gardiner?
- ◆ How does Gardiner see the relationship between living beings and the land?

‘THE BRIDGE’ BY FRANCES OLIVE

- ◆ Why does Frances Olive personify the creek at the opening of ‘The Bridge’?
- ◆ What made Olive’s family a target of local bullies?
- ◆ What does the violin represent in the piece?
- ◆ How does Olive interpret the town’s name?
- ◆ In what ways does the incident on the bridge define Olive’s relationship with the town?

‘MEAT’ BY CLAIRE BAKER

- ◆ What role did killing and eating animals play in Claire Baker’s childhood?
- ◆ Why is it significant that Baker’s father did not adhere to conservative gender norms?
- ◆ How did the death of her father act as a catalyst for Baker to cease eating meat?
- ◆ In what ways does Baker consider eating meat a ‘cultural practice’ in rural Australia?
- ◆ What does Barker see as the impacts of ‘industrialised meat production’?

‘A MONTAGE OF MEMORIES FROM THE COUNTRY SCHOOL BUS’ BY ADELAIDE GREGG

- ◆ Why does Adelaide Gregg open the piece with the tale of the golden orb spiders?

- ◆ What is the significance of the bus being ‘a microcosm of schoolyard politics’?
- ◆ How did seating on the bus reflect the region’s social hierarchy?
- ◆ Why does Gregg see the country as being ‘defined by its absences’?
- ◆ How did the bus serve as a ‘road in-between [Gregg’s] worlds’?

‘THE DRAIN’ BY MEG SATTLER

- ◆ In what ways did Meg Sattler feel out of place ‘on the margins of the popular group’?
- ◆ What role did clothes play in establishing Sattler’s social standing?
- ◆ How does Sattler characterise the role of the drain in the town’s social relationships?
- ◆ What role does race play in Sattler’s experience of the Territory?
- ◆ Why is it important to Sattler that she finds her ‘real laugh’ again?

‘SWEET AND SOUR’ BY LILY CHAN

- ◆ Why is the Mareeba Rodeo so important to Mareeba?
- ◆ What role does the Rodeo Queen play in the festivities?
- ◆ How did Lily Chan feel that working at the Rodeo made her ‘stand out’?
- ◆ What connects Chan and Karin?
- ◆ Why did the conversation with Karin help Chan ‘realise the silver lining of the small country town’?

‘THE OLD BUSHBLOCK’ BY DOROTHEA PFAFF

- ◆ What are the implications of Dorothea Pfaff characterising her mother’s clothes as being ‘Bushblock drab’?
- ◆ How does Pfaff view her father’s ambitions for creating ‘meandering forests paths’ on the Bushblock?
- ◆ Why did a young Pfaff feel that labour on the Bushblock was ‘only work for work’s sake’?
- ◆ What role does fire play in the piece?
- ◆ What does Pfaff come to understand about her father’s attachment to the Bushblock after his passing?

‘BAD DREAMS AND A TRUSTY SHOVEL’ BY ANGUS THOMPSON

- ◆ What is the significance of Angus Thompson’s memory of ‘searing pain coupled with a supreme sense of isolation’?
- ◆ How does social class shape the piece?
- ◆ Why did the ‘sparseness’ of the area terrify Thompson?
- ◆ What role does fear play in Thompson’s sense of the country?
- ◆ In what ways does Thompson’s father embody his understanding of life in the country?

‘PAH PAW PA’ BY YOUSSEF SAUDIE

- ◆ How did you respond to the racial epithets aimed at Youssef Saudie at the opening of the piece?
- ◆ What role does racism play in the schools that Saudie attends?
- ◆ Why is it significant to Saudie that he did not know that he was born in Papua New Guinea?
- ◆ What role does language play in creating a sense of connection for Saudie’s mother?
- ◆ How does Saudie feel connected to Papua New Guinea?

‘TERRITORY’ BY HOLDEN SHEPPARD

- ◆ What role does cricket play in Holden Sheppard’s sense of identity at the age of nine?
- ◆ How does the school dance reflect Sheppard’s social world at the age of eleven?
- ◆ Why does Sheppard struggle to engage with mainstream masculinity at the age of thirteen?
- ◆ What is the significance of Sheppard feeling that he couldn’t ‘hide anything’ at the age of fifteen?
- ◆ How did leaving Geraldton at eighteen change Sheppard’s understanding of ‘home’?

‘MUMMA BIRD’ BY JACINTA DIETRICH

- ◆ How did Jacinta Dietrich’s home challenge mainstream ideas of the Australian countryside?
- ◆ What role did birds play in Dietrich’s childhood home?
- ◆ What were the characteristics of the ‘ecowarrior’ lifestyle Dietrich remembers from her childhood?
- ◆ Why might the family have found living in a town ‘suffocating’?
- ◆ What does Dietrich think motivated her mother’s choices?

‘PRAWN’ BY EDI MITSUDA

- ◆ What role did social class play in Edi Mitsuda’s adventures on the school bus?
- ◆ Why were ‘brutality and cruelty’ central to Mitsuda’s experience of adolescence?
- ◆ How does Mitsuda’s description of the world outside the bus window shape the reader’s understanding of the piece?
- ◆ What are the implications of the piece’s title, ‘Prawn’?
- ◆ Why did Mitsuda feel that ‘all of [them] were trying [their] best’?

‘MOVE’ BY FARZ EDRAKI

- ◆ Why did Farz Edraki feel that ‘being in transit became a state of mind’?

- ◆ What are the implications of Edraki being asked where she ‘was from, really’?
- ◆ How did Edraki’s parents maintain connection to Iranian culture during their time in rural and regional Australia?
- ◆ Why did Edraki’s family need to ‘code switch’?
- ◆ In what ways did September 11 change Edraki’s experience of life in the country?

‘SEEDPODS’ BY BENJAMIN RILEY

- ◆ How did Benjamin Riley come to an awareness that he grew up poor?
- ◆ What are the implications of Wodonga’s residents claiming that they are from ‘Albury-Wodonga’?
- ◆ Why did Riley develop a narrative that ‘growing up in the country had cut [him] off from the vast, complex world outside [his] hometown’?
- ◆ What does Riley learn that challenges his memories of Wodonga?
- ◆ What relationship does Riley see between ‘personal agency’ and the ‘limitations imposed on [him] by growing up in the country’?

‘DRIVEN’ BY JESSICA WHITE

- ◆ How did Jessica White’s location shape her experience of healthcare at a young age?
- ◆ What are the implications of the extended family’s use of a ‘party line’?
- ◆ Why was White raised as an ‘oral deaf’ person?
- ◆ What role did books play in White’s childhood and adolescence?
- ◆ What was the significance of White developing a ‘deaf identity’?

‘SEPARATE, INITIATE, BURN’ BY CARLY RAWSON

- ◆ What are the implications of Carly Rawson feeling her ‘bones aflame’?
- ◆ What forced Rawson to connect with the ‘wandering ghosts’?
- ◆ Why was the town ‘too small’ for Rawson and her friends?
- ◆ How did Jade’s experience shape the friendship group?
- ◆ In what ways does the fire change Rawson’s relationship to Jade’s story?

‘EVERY SATURDAY IN SUMMER’ BY SAMANTHA LEUNG

- ◆ Why is sport so important in Geraldton?
- ◆ Why does Samantha Leung believe that Geraldton is ‘a country town that lacks idyll’?
- ◆ What are the implications of Geraldton being ‘a place where you got stuck’?
- ◆ How did the racism of Geraldton shape Leung’s experience?
- ◆ What role did water polo play in Leung’s adolescence?

‘LOOKING BACK, LOOKING UP’ BY JES LAYTON

- ◆ How does Jes Layton capture familial tension in the dialogue at the opening of the piece?
- ◆ Why is Layton consumed by nostalgia while ‘looking up’?
- ◆ What aspects of rural life amplified Layton’s struggles with identity?
- ◆ What role does the sky play in this piece?
- ◆ How has Layton’s relationship to the Otways changed over time?

**‘IF SOMEONE TOOK YOU, THEY’D SOON BRING YOU BACK’
BY GAY LYNCH**

- ◆ What do the experiences of Gay Lynch’s mother reflect about colonisation?
- ◆ How does the family’s movement shape Lynch’s childhood?
- ◆ What role do books play in Lynch’s childhood?
- ◆ How do social norms shape Lynch’s experiences in various towns?
- ◆ Why does Lynch feel more comfortable with country people in the city?

‘THE DEVIL AND THE FAR NORTH-WEST’ BY CADE LUCAS

- ◆ Why does Cade Lucas feel that growing up in Tasmania’s far north-west ‘exacerbated and obscured’ his learning difficulties?
- ◆ What are the implications of Smithton’s isolation being ‘as much metaphorical as physical’?
- ◆ How did being seen as ‘a problem that needed to be managed’ restrict Lucas in his early years of schooling?
- ◆ What role did religion play in the broader community?
- ◆ Why did Lucas have his ‘neurological deficiencies... mistaken for moral ones’?

‘A GREY CAT IN A SUNSET TOWN’ BY DR. KAREN LOWRY

- ◆ Why does Karen Lowry feel that ‘every day [the skies] are a contradiction’?
- ◆ How do the kittens reflect Lowry’s reflections on the new town?
- ◆ What are the consequences of constant movement for a young Lowry?
- ◆ What role does colour play in Lowry’s piece?
- ◆ How does Lowry’s relationship with music change as she ages?

‘IRRIGATION’ BY JAY CARMICHAEL

- ◆ What role did irrigation systems play in Jay Carmichael’s childhood?
- ◆ How does the use of second person shape the meaning of Carmichael’s piece?
- ◆ How did social class shape the differences between Waaia and Numurkah?
- ◆ Why was sexuality such a complex issue for young people in Numurkah?
- ◆ What impact did the accident have on Carmichael’s growth?

‘HOMESICK’ BY CASSANDRA GOODWIN

- ◆ Why were final exams so important to Cassandra Goodwin?
- ◆ How did her mother’s expectations shape Goodwin’s childhood?
- ◆ What are the implications of Goodwin believing that ‘the ten blocks that made up [her] hometown formed a bitumen cage that confined me’?
- ◆ What did Tess represent for a young Goodwin?
- ◆ Why was Goodwin so struck by the image of the distressed woman?

‘SHALLOW CROSSING’ BY TOM PLEVEY

- ◆ What clichés about growing up in the country does Tom Plevey address in the opening of his piece?
- ◆ What distinction does Plevey make between stories of the country written by outsiders, and those written by residents?
- ◆ What are the key features of Bingara’s history?
- ◆ How did leaving change what was ‘perfectly normal’ for Plevey?
- ◆ Why does Plevey believe in the importance of ‘geographic introspection’?

‘IT IS ALL BEFORE US’ BY ALAINA DEAN

- ◆ What is the significance of ‘The View’ to Alaina Dean?
- ◆ How does Dean use repetition throughout her piece?
- ◆ Why does Dean fear writing ‘something wrong’ about her childhood?
- ◆ Why does Dean believe it is ‘easy to stagnate’ when living surrounded by family?
- ◆ What are the contradictions evident in Dean’s view of growing up in the country?

‘AN OGMORE STORY’ BY MELINDA MANN

- ◆ How does Melinda Mann describe the role that the railway played in dictating Ogmores’ rhythms?
- ◆ What role did Joskeleigh play in the South Sea Islander community?
- ◆ Why did Mann’s father have a ‘deep reverence’ for the land?
- ◆ How did Mann become ‘grounded in [her] identity’?
- ◆ What distinction does Mann draw between ‘resilient’ and ‘continuing’ communities?

Section C

After reading

1. THEMES

A. Identity and belonging

- ◆ *Growing Up in Country Australia* reflects the unique ways that community is formed in remote settings. The intersection of circumstance and will provides these towns with an almost unshakeable sense of unity. In many cases, this is a biological fact, with their childhood worlds being dominated by siblings and cousins.
- ◆ For some, this sense of connection is suffocating. It relies, in many cases, on pledging an allegiance to a set of social norms that may be conservative at best or intolerant at worst. Eyes are everywhere, and there is no space to develop an identity independent of the collective experience.
- ◆ Despite this often-crushing sense of proximity, many of the writers in the collection are besieged by loneliness. This is caused either by the tyranny of physical distance or a sense of alienation from the people around them.
- ◆ Many of the writers in the collection feel the need to leave their communities upon finishing secondary school. It is this act of leaving, and viewing their community from the outside, that allows them the space needed to develop a sense of their own agency.
- ◆ Other voices in the collection experienced the country as outsiders, either because their family were newcomers to town, or because they existed on the periphery due to a community's prejudices. These voices highlight the precarity of existence in towns where the population is small and options for connections are limited.
- ◆ Communal interests, be they in sport or eating meat, drive many of the relationships in this collection. If writers and their families are able to invest themselves in these pursuits they are often able to make inroads into the community. If not, they are often consigned to a life outside the mainstream.
- ◆ A number of writers in the collection make reference to the way that the country school bus served as a locus for any of the paradoxes discussed here. The bus served as a liminal space, between the larger centres that housed schools, and the outpost of rural and regional homesteads.

B. Social class

- ◆ Many of the pieces in *Growing Up in Country Australia* reflect the dominance of social class in rural and regional settings. Wealth secures status in these communities, providing property and power. This status is often generational, and born off the back of a role in colonial occupation of the land. This is an uncomfortable truth for many of the writers in the collection.

- ◆ Those writers who grew up poor often lacked access to many elements of community, forced to move frequently in pursuit of employment or housing. These same families often struggled to access educational opportunities, limiting their options in childhood and beyond.
- ◆ Despite the disparities within communities, *Growing Up in Country Australia* highlights the systemic poverty evident in rural and regional communities. A lack of access to education, healthcare, public transport and cultural opportunities shapes the experiences of many within the collection. This is as true for younger contributors as it is for those who are well into their adulthood, suggesting that little has changed for residents of these small towns.

C. Racism and colonisation

- ◆ Many of the stories in the collection make explicit reference to the Traditional Custodians of the land on which the tales take place. For the First Nations writers in the collection, their relationship to their land is clouded by the ongoing disruption that colonisation has caused in their families and communities. For those who are part of settler communities, this acknowledgement problematises their own relationship to the land, aware as they are of the role that their communities have played in establishing racist structures.
- ◆ The writers acknowledge the complexities of the experiences of people of colour in rural and regional Australia. For some, their homes were places of safety and relative acceptance. For others, they were ostracised by largely homogenous white settler communities. In these tales, writers report the way that racism was embedded in their communities, from the structures of their towns through to casual conversation in the schoolyard.
- ◆ For some writers there is a frustration in engaging with how the metropolitan 'progressive' community views the politics of the bush. In their minds, people in large cities are arrogant in their characterisation of rural and regional communities. These city dwellers, who bemoan the conservatism of the country, lack both direct personal experience of the reality of life in small towns and an understanding of their own hypocrisy.

D. The natural world

- ◆ Almost every piece in *Growing Up in Country Australia* makes explicit and detailed reference to the physical landscape. Whether it is the picturesque biodiversity or the cruel cycles of the climate, life in rural and regional Australia is characterised by an acute awareness of the natural world.

- ◆ This complicated relationship with the natural world shapes the economic fortunes of families, and is often intimately tied to a community's sense of belonging. The writers track how the unpredictable rhythms of this world can make and break fortunes on a whim. For some of the writers who sketch portraits of their parents, there is a sense that the desire to stay in cruel and unforgiving climates reflects a sort of fanaticism or masochism that the children struggle to understand as they age themselves.
- ◆ Hanging over the collection is a heady sense of the impact of both colonisation and climate change on the natural world. Increasingly furious bushfires lap at the edges of many of these towns, and the writers must grapple with these developing dangers.

2. EXTENDED ANALYTICAL RESPONSES

Students may be asked to respond analytically to the work in *Growing Up in Country Australia*. Some possible essay questions:

- ◆ To what extent does social class define the experiences of writers in *Growing Up in Country Australia*?
- ◆ 'Growing Up in Country Australia shows that belonging can come at great costs.' Discuss.
- ◆ 'Growing up in country Australia is hard work if you do not fit in.' Do you agree?
- ◆ To what extent is growing up in country Australia defined by a relationship with the natural world?
- ◆ 'Growing up in country Australia is more diverse than many believe.' Discuss.
- ◆ 'Growing Up in Country Australia celebrates the ties of community.' Do you agree?
- ◆ To what extent do the writers in *Growing Up in Country Australia* suffer for their isolation?
- ◆ 'Growing Up in Country Australia suggests that it is city-dwellers who suffer for their location.' Discuss.
- ◆ 'Growing Up in Country Australia reflects the toll of colonisation.' Do you agree?
- ◆ 'Growing Up in Country Australia suggests that you can only understand a place when you leave it.' Do you agree?