



Jasper Jones Reading Guide

S.A. Jones v2 April 2010

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Synopsis

Jasper Jones is set in the small, fictional mining town of Corrigan in regional Western Australia. It is 1965 and the innocence and isolation of the state is threatened by the draft sending young men to Vietnam and by a serial killer named Eric Edgar Cooke.

Against this backdrop, thirteen year old Charlie Buktin's reading is interrupted one suffocatingly hot night by a tapping on his window. It is Jasper Jones, the town's mixed race 'bad boy' and all purpose scapegoat, who has come to ask for Charlie's help. Together Charlie and Jasper attempt to unravel the mystery of what has happened to Laura Wishart, the Shire President's missing daughter.

In this coming of stage story, Charlie must question his conventional notions of what is right and wrong as he navigates small-town morality, racism and hypocrisy.

About the Author

Craig Silvey is a Western Australian author who was raised on an orchard in Dwellingup, WA. His first novel *Rhubarb* was released to considerable critical acclaim and was selected as the 'one book' by the Perth International Arts Festival in 2005. It has sold more than 18,000 copies to date. Silvey released an illustrated book telling the story of Warren, the guide dog from *Rhubarb*, in *The World According to Warren*.

Jasper Jones has been longlisted for the Miles Franklin Award and won the Indie Book Award in 2009. Silvey is currently adapting the story for a script.

For interviews with Silvey regarding *Jasper Jones* see:

<http://blog.booktopia.com.au/2010/04/12/feature-craig-silvey-answers-ten-terrifying-questions/?blogsub=confirming>

<http://www.allenandunwin.com/default.aspx?page=647>

Edition Used

Craig Silvey, *Jasper Jones*, 2009 Allen and Unwin

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1974, Pan Books

Morality and Ethics

Moral Duality

A feature of coming of age stories is the transition from a one dimensional view of morality and ethics to a far more complex and nuanced understanding of right and wrong. The world that reveals itself to Charlie is one in which apparently contradictory views and behaviours enjoy a snug co-existence.

As in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, the people of Corrigan are capable of holding antithetical views in comfortable harmony. Thus, when Jasper leads the local football team to victory after victory:

'The folks who watch Jasper play, who barrack for him like he was one of their own, are the same ones who might cut their eyes at him should he walk their way a few hours after the game. But they'll smile and cheer and shake their heads in wonderment if he takes a run through the centre or if he nails one from the pocket. His teammates too. They'll surround him and scruff at his hair in celebration, they'll applaud and pat his arse, but once the game is over, the pattern returns. He's back to being shunned by the boys and privately reviled and privately adored by the girls' (p. 60)

When the Sergeant who savagely beat Jasper comes to Charlie's house and is comforting and familiar, Charlie has a difficult time reconciling these different versions of him:

'I remember thinking that if I hadn't seen the cuts and bruises on Jasper's face for myself, I wouldn't have thought for a second that this burly paternal copper was capable of locking up an innocent boy without charge and beating him. If Jasper Jones hadn't shown me the cigarette burns on his shoulders just hours before, if I hadn't touched their ugly pink pucker with my fingertips, I wouldn't have suspected this man to be the monster he was' (p. 160)

Charlie's mother, Ruth, cultivates her image as a good mother and citizen, member of the CWA and volunteer for all manner of civic events. She demands obedience and respect from Charlie and is capable of a quasi-hysterical response when she doesn't receive it. Yet she is carrying on a clandestine affair with an unnamed man from the back seat of a car.

Charlie's disappearance compromises Ruth's image:

'I'd shattered the facade, I'd sullied the family name and her repute. Tongues were wagging. Aspersions were being cast like dandelion spores on hot gossipy winds. The CWA brigade and the badminton babblers were tutting like vultures. I was no longer a model child and she was no longer a model mother. And a snide, petty part of me was thrilled about it, almost proud' (p. 198-199)

When Charlie finds his mother in a compromising position with a man who is not his father it shifts the power balance between them (p. 244). At this moment, Ruth loses her moral authority over Charlie and in some ways Charlie ceases to be a 'child'. He must assume responsibility for his own moral stance.

Pete Wishart, Laura and Eliza's father, is probably the most hypocritical character in the novel. Whenever Charlie mentions him, he almost invariably remarks that he is the "Shire President". Mr Wishart lives in the posh part of town in a lovely home and is a man of influence. Yet he is a drunkard and an abusive, sexually violent man. He has impregnated Laura but savagely beats Jasper Jones in the confines of the jail cell as if Jasper is responsible for her disappearance. In an echo of Charlie's mother's misplaced guilt Jasper tells us '...he was sticking the boot in most of all. Pissed as a rat and twice as angry. Screamin at me, spittin. *Where is she? What did you do?* Stinkin of turps, worse than my old man' (pp. 136-137)

Charlie replies 'But...But he's the shire *president*'. With this remark, Charlie makes it clear how hard it is to reconcile the conflicting versions of Mr Wishart.

These opposites should not enjoy a snug co-existence, and yet they do. How?

Scapegoats

Despite their own grave personal flaws and egregious conduct, Corrigan's citizens have Jasper Jones pegged as an unrepentant bad boy. Whenever a crime or a misdemeanour occurs – such as the burning down of the Post Office – he is the likeliest suspect. Jasper is a convenient tool for Corrigan. The 'idea' of Jasper Jones enables a comfortable abrogation of personal responsibility.

'Jasper Jones has a terrible reputation in Corrigan. He's a Thief, a Liar, A Thug, a Truant. He's lazy and unreliable. He's a feral and an orphan, or as good as. His mother is dead and his father is no good. He's the rotten model that parents hold aloft as a warning: This is how you'll end up if you're disobedient. Jasper Jones is the example of where poor aptitude and attitude will lead.'

In families throughout Corrigan, he's the first name to be blamed for all manner of trouble. Whatever the misdemeanour, and no matter how clear their own child's guilt, parents ask immediately: Were you with Jasper Jones?' (p.5)

Ironically Jasper immediately scapegoats the other town pariah, Mad Jack Lionel, as responsible for Laura's death. Even though he knows what Laura's father is capable of, it is as if even he cannot conceive of such a monstrosity from the town's upright president. Yet on far less evidence he leaps to Mad Jack's guilt.

Morality versus Ethics

When Jasper asks Charlie for help, he also asks Charlie to develop a new moral code; one that sees beyond conventional morality to a deeper, more complex understanding of 'right and wrong'. Thus, Jasper does not deny that he is a thief, but he has a particular moral code around theft:

'...outside of my old man's pocket I never stole a thing I dint need. For certains. I'm talkin about food, matches, clothes sometimes, whatever. Nuthin big, ever. Nuthin people couldn't go without. And, see, it's these people who expect three meals a day, who got pressed clothes and a missus and a car and a job, it's them that look at me like I'm rubbish. Like I've got a choice. Like I'm just some runt who just needs to lift his game. And they're the one's tellin their kids that I'm no good. They don't know shit about what it is to be me. They never ask why. Why would he be stealin? They just reckon it's my nature' (p. 34)

'Your dad doesn't even buy food?' responds Charlie – underlining the gulf in their own experience and their different *capacity* to adhere to society's moral code (p.34).

Later Jasper dismisses conventional morality as hollow:

'I bin looking after myself since I can remember. And that's food, clothes, where I sleep, the whole lot. I tole you, it doesn't matter how old you are. Everyone ages. Everyone can learn a trade and pay taxes and have a family. But that's not growing up. It's about how you act when your shit gets shaken up, it's about how much you see around you. That's what makes a man. And if I can do it here, in this town, I can do it anywhere I reckon' (p. 139)

Jasper's thoughts on conventional religion indicate that morality is a personal choice: 'There's nuthin up there that gives a shit if I took a pack of smokes or lifted a tin of beef. I'm left with meself, and I know what's right and what isn't' (pp. 148 – 149)

Despite his thieving and truancy, Jasper has a strong sense of honour. He believes that he let Laura down, failed in his duty to 'protect her'. When Charlie probes as to what she needed to be protected from, Jasper demurs (p. 143). He continues to keep her confidence even after she is dead.

Jasper's own brand of personal ethics forces Charlie to develop a more sophisticated understanding of morality. When the town gathers to discuss Laura's disappearance:

'... someone mentioned Jasper Jones. The same way they did when the post office burned to the ground. With tilted eyebrows and suspicion...And I understood then that maybe we really did do the wrong thing for the right reasons' (p.129 my emphasis)

Charlie says of Jasper 'I think he's probably the most honest person in this town'. (p.42)

Responsibility and Culpability

Laura tied the rope around her own neck and hung herself. Yet both Jasper and Eliza claim culpability for her 'murder' (see p. 143 for Jasper's sense of responsibility). Like Jasper, Eliza feels responsible for Laura's death, telling Charlie 'I killed her. It's all my fault. I killed Laura' (p. 250) Eliza repeats her guilt on p. 263. Of course this isn't literally true. Laura took her own life. To what extent do Eliza and Jasper have a shared responsibility for Laura's death?

What level of responsibility is born by the people around Laura? Is her father a murderer? How complicit is her mother? As Eliza says 'And where was her mother? Where was she in all this?' (p. 252).

Charlie's father is aware of Laura's suffering, yet he too has failed to speak up, probe or investigate further. Charlie's Dad tells the police that '...there's something about her that seems troubled and volatile. It's as though she holds you at a distance, so I don't know her as well as I know some of my other students' (p. 105)

What are our responsibilities to one another? Who should have spoken up about Laura? Why, when Mrs Lu is attacked with boiling water at the town meeting, does no one come to her aid? (p. 128)

In attempting to unravel what happened to Laura, Charlie begins to ponder what people are capable of. He watches the cricket coach laugh as the cricketers relentlessly bully and physically assault Jeffrey:

'I look at the bastard coach. How he stands, how he intermittently pinches at his dick and shifts his weight. How his dark rodent eyes lazily survey this pack of boorish bullies. How his nubby fingers scissor his cigarette. And I think: if he can watch this with a thin grin, what else could he watch? What other cruel things could be view without intervening?' (p. 64)

Charlie wonders how people can be complicit with unspeakable acts of cruelty and violence. He considers the case of Sylvia Likens, a young girl mercilessly beaten and degraded by the woman who was supposed to be caring for her. The 'carer' enlisted other neighbourhood children into her cruelty. No one spoke up to protect Sylvia or report the abuse to the authorities (pp. 82-85).

Yet Charlie does not speak up when Jeffrey is taunted and teased and even physically manhandled by the town racists and bullies (e.g. p. 62). Nor does he defend Eliza from the catcalls of the cricketing yobs (pp. 62-63). Charlie is aware of his own cowardice and puts it down to his lack of physical bulk:

'I think it's harder for me to get brave. It's harder for me to suck it in and square up and bunch my fists. I think the less meat you've got on you, the more you know, the more you're capable of being beaten, the more it sets you back. The lower your weight division, the more often you're swinging up. I think the more you have to defend, the harder it is to press forward without looking back. I'd have Superman's swagger if I couldn't get hurt, but I've got the Charles Bucktin slouch. Because I bruise like a peach. And I'm afraid of insects. And I don't know how to fight' (p.70)

Yet Jeffrey is small in stature and apparently fearless. When Jeffrey jauntily clips down the hill to join the Corrigan Cricketers Charlie thinks 'He's insane. Or he has no memory' (p. 57) Are either of these things true of Jeffrey?

Charlie and Jeffrey spend considerable time debating which superhero is greater: Batman or Superman (p. 51). Each takes up the position antithetical to their actions. Brave, indomitable Jeffrey is for the virtually indestructible alien Superman. Charlie is for the entirely human Batman.

'Superman is boring. He's too accomplished. There's nothing interesting about him. There's no story. He's too good. It's not even an effort for him to apprehend criminals or save children from fires. In the end, they had to invent some stupid arbitrary green mineral to give him a weakness. Whatever. It's boring. You know it.' (p.51)

On Batman: 'He can hold his own. He has an alter ego. He has a costume. He fights for Truth and Justice. He has arch enemies. And he does all this without any weird mutations. He's just really determined. That's what makes him

interesting. The fact that with enough dedication and desire, we could all be Batman' (p.53)

'Superman fears nothing because outside a few very specific circumstances where he might encounter some stupid rock, nothing can possibly do him in. Batman has the same vulnerabilities as the rest of us, so he has the same fears as us. That's why he is the most courageous: because he can put those aside and fight on regardless. My point is this: the more you have to lose, the braver you are for standing up' (p. 54)

Charlie explicitly compares Jasper to Batman as they go to confront Mad Jack Lionel: 'I watch him walk. Straight-backed, chest full of air. And I see it now, just how counterfeit his confidence is. It's a noise, a distraction, hot air. It's Batman's cape, it's my father's combover' (p. 228)

To what extent does Charlie become 'Batman' in the story?

How, Charlie wonders, are people like Sylvia Likens' tormentor and Eric Edgar Cooke created? What makes them murderous and without empathy? Charlie notes the parallels between Eric Edgar Cooke's childhood and Jasper's (pp. 80-81). Yet Jasper has emerged with his sense of empathy and responsibility intact. How?

On Cooke: 'He just wanted to hurt somebody. It sounds so vengeful. But was that really it? Was he out there laying into some kind of version of his father? Was he fighting back through other means? But why would Cooke prey on women then? Why would he make victims of the innocent, like his father had done to him? It makes no sense. So maybe it was that sense of power that he wanted. After a life of being force-fed shit, of beatings and down-tread, he wanted to turn it right round on itself. Maybe he wanted to become his father. To swap roles. To finally be on top. He wanted people at his mercy. He wanted to hurt them. Just like he'd been hurt. Maybe he wanted a whole city to know that fear. Could that really be it?' (p. 99)

These musings on Cooke's motivations occur as Charlie is digging the pointless hole his mother has ordered (p. 93). Why does Charlie's mother – Ruth - behave like this? Is she sadistic? Is it a just punishment for Charlie who has disappeared whilst the town is in the grip of fear after Laura's disappearance? Is she bored? Or is she desperate to feel a semblance of power? Ruth comes from 'old money' and was studying at UWA when she fell pregnant with Charlie. She moved to Corrigan and did not complete her studies. Would this account for Charlie's theory of her powerlessness? She also claims that Charlie's father doesn't love her and never has (p. 246)

'My mother has become so hard. It's perplexing. She's always been curt and impatient, but there used to be warmth beneath it all. I don't know. Maybe she's finally fed up. It's crystal clear to everyone except my father that she hates Corrigan. I suspect she always has. Of course, I can only speculate, but the fact that my parents were married and moved here six months before I was born suggests that maybe they were shamed into eloping and alighting

someplace far from the city. Or maybe this was the only place my father could get posted. Maybe it was a sense of adventure: a fresh start in an expanding coal town.

Seems unlikely' (p. 96)

Charlie's mother is hysterical when he returns from his night time pilgrimage with Jasper Jones (p. 155) Perhaps too hysterical? She segues from her anger at Charlie into a scattergun rage at Charlie's father and her lot. Is there an element of 'the lady doth protest too much' here? Charlie tells us that she has come home drunk and smelling of perfume and wine and something 'sour and sweaty that I can't pinpoint' (p. 156). Charlie's mother has been meeting her lover and part of her rage is in fact guilt. Charlie's father certainly has his suspicions. 'Ruth, there are things in this world that you don't think I know, but I do'. (p. 162)

Atonement

Charlie and Jasper discover the word 'sorry' carved into the tree from which Laura hung herself (p. 152). What is it that Eliza is apologising for? To whom is she apologizing?

Jasper tells Charlie about discovering the burnt out wreck of a car at Mad Jack Lionel's and the word 'sorry' etched into it (p. 195).

Charlie muses about what it means to be 'sorry':

'...it becomes clear to me that it's a good word used by good people...Every character in every story is buffeted between good and bad, between right and wrong. But it's good people who can tell the difference, who know when they've crossed the line. And it's a hard and humbling gesture, to take the blame and admit fault. You've got to get brave to say it and mean it. Sorry...Sorry is a lot of things. It's a hole refilled. A debt repaid. Sorry is the wake of misdeed. It's the crippling ripple of consequence. Sorry is sadness, just as knowing is sadness. Sorry is sometimes self-pity. But Sorry, really, is not about you. It's theirs to take or leave' (p. 199)

After An Lu's garden has been destroyed, the people of Corrigan leave cuttings and grafts of flowers for the Lu's to use.

'It seems like it's their way of saying they're sorry for what happened. But I wonder if they would have brought anything if his garden hadn't been razed. Nobody brought anything for Mrs Lu after she was scalded and scolded by Sue Findlay. Maybe because his garden was a beautiful thing everyone could share in, they felt like they lost something too' (p. 213)

Charlie speculates that the town is 'sorry' because the attack has had a detrimental effect on them; rather than because they particularly sympathise with the Lu's.

When Laura confronts her mother with the truth of her father's abuse, her father shows no remorse. Eliza tells us that he has 'no love in him'. Is apology possible only by those capable of love?

Law and Legality

Jasper's plight forces Charlie to recognise that there isn't necessarily a relationship between law and justice. When Jasper argues that he and Charlie must figure out who killed Laura, Charlie's response is that they should go to the police:

'Jasper, there's still a chance that they won't blame you for this. There's a chance, isn't there? Listen, we can still do this properly. Tell the right people. The authorities. Do it by the book. I mean, you're still protected by law...' (p.13)

In contrast, Jasper knows that the rule of law does not apply to people like him.

'Bloody hell. Listen, Charlie, we can't tell anyone. No way. Specially the police. Because they are gonna say it was me. Straight up. Unnerstand? They're gonna come here, see that it's my place, they'll see her face, they'll see she's bin knocked around, they'll see that it's my rope. And they're gonna say it was me that punched her up. They'll charge me and put me away, mate. No questions' (pp.13-14)

'But we can still try. And that's more than the Corrigan police are gonna do if I go walk in there right now and tell them what's happened. It'll be case closed before it's even opened, Charlie. There'll be a fucken court date before there's a funeral. You know it. You know this town. I don't have to do nothing to get into trouble here. So we got to find out who done this. We got to' (p. 17)

To what extent does town gossip fulfil the function of a Greek chorus or a jury? Consider that it isn't the law that condemns Mad Jack Lionel for Rosie's death but the town:

'...Corrigan was ruthless. Rumours spread regarding the circumstances that saw Jack Lionel speeding away from town with Rosie Jones. Some said that he'd abducted her. That he'd become infatuated with his son's wife and had stolen her away, and when she'd fought him in the car, the scuffle had caused them to crash. Others asserted that they'd planned their escape together, and it was their lusty fumbings that had them coming unstuck on the road...'(p. 240)

There are several instances of 'law breaking' in the novel, e.g. Jasper's thieving, Eliza's arson and Jasper and Charlie's disposal of Laura's body. But are these criminal acts *just*?

Consider this quote from *To Kill a Mockingbird* in which Atticus addresses the Tom Robinson jury:

'But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal – there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, the stupid man the equal of an Einstein and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. That institution, gentlemen, is a court. It can be the Supreme Court of the United States or the humblest J.P. court in the land, or this honourable court which you serve. Our courts have their faults, as does any human institution, but in this country our courts are the great levellers, and in our courts all men are created equal' (TKAM p. 209)

How true is this ideal?

Race and Ethnicity

Charlie repeats town gossip that Jasper Jones is a 'half-caste', which angers Charlie's father. When it becomes clear that Charlie doesn't understand the term his father 'softened and explained'. (p.6) However, as readers we don't hear this explanation. Instead, we are told that Charlie's father finally grants him access to his library and gives Charlie

'a leatherbound stack of Southern writers to start with. Welty, Faulkener, Harper Lee, Flannery O'Connor. But the biggest portion of the stack was Mark Twain' (p.6)

Why is the choice of these writers significant?

What is it about Charlie's use of the term 'half caste' and his father's explanation that marks the passage into adulthood symbolised by access to Wes Buktin's library?

Jasper says of his status 'They reckon I'm just half an animal with half a vote' (pp.22-23). Indigenous people were not counted in the population census with other citizens until 1967. Instead, they were counted as part of the flora and fauna, hence Jasper's reference to 'half an animal'. In 1962 voting rights were extended to Indigenous people under the Commonwealth franchise but voting was not compulsory as it was for other citizens. Hence, 'half a vote'.

For extensive material on the 1967 referendum and the legal status of Indigenous people before and after see:

http://www.vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/downloads/sample_units/aboutreferendum.doc

<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2007/s1933845.htm>

Like Jasper, Jeffrey Lu's family are racial 'outsiders'. They are Vietnamese Australians during the Vietnam war. Australian men, including those from Corrigan, are being drafted to fight in the war (e.g. p. 125). An – Jeffrey's father – is an engineer who is sponsored to work on the Corrigan mine. The Lus are subjected to a casual and omnipresent racism. Jeffrey is called 'Cong' by the cricket team (a reference to the Viet Cong) and his ancestry mimicked 'Ah, me so *solly*'. 'Communist' is an all purpose slur, also used by Jeffrey. Perhaps in an effort to demonstrate their 'Australianness', the Lus

poke fun at the communists too. Their cat is named Chairman Meow and their (swearing) budgie Chairman Wow.

Despite their attempts to assimilate, the Lus are scapegoated for the impact the war has on the town. Sue Findlay attacks Mrs Lu after her husband is killed in the war and her son drafted (p. 128. Mr Buktin's explanation p. 130). Yet the An family are victims of the war too. Jeffrey's uncle and aunt are killed in a bombing raid in the war (p.114) leaving behind orphaned children that the Lus cannot remove from the country.

One of the men who destroys An's garden has lost his job for drunkenness, yet chooses to blame the sponsored An for his unemployment. 'He's *involved*. He's red. He's a *red! Fucking! Rat!*'(p. 204)

In what ways is Jeffrey's experience parallel to Jasper's? In what ways different?

To Kill a Mockingbird (TKAM)

Craig Silvey openly invites us to ponder the parallels between *Jasper Jones* and Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Charlie surmises that Jasper sees him as an 'Atticus Finch': learned, upright and brave and tries to assume an Atticus-like pose:

- 'He [Jasper] must have presumed me to be genuine and fair. Like Atticus Finch: dignified and reasonable and wise'. (p.18)
- 'I try to reason with him, like Atticus might' (p.19)
- 'I try to reason it through as Atticus Finch might' (p. 143)
- 'I wonder too if Jasper actually needs my help. Whether he came to my window looking for Atticus Finch or Tom Sawyer. A brain or an ally. Maybe both' (p. 144)
- 'I had to be even handed and logical, like Atticus, like my dad' (p. 196)

Harper Lee and Truman Capote are both referenced in the novel.

'I sometimes like to imagine myself as a famous author in an austere, candelabra-lit ballroom, where I am bantering with beat poets and novelists like Harper Lee and Truman Capote'. (p. 36)

Harper Lee based the character of Dell on her childhood friend Capote. Capote himself wrote a non fiction novel *In Cold Blood* (Harper Lee acted as the research assistant for Capote's novel) which investigated a murder in Kansas and asked some difficult questions about ethnicity (in this case American Indian) and criminality. *In Cold Blood* is referenced, though not mentioned, on page 163 as a book that Charlie cannot read. 'Every time I opened it I felt as though insects were crawling over my scalp and down my neck'. Truman Capote's book *Breakfast At Tiffany's* is also mentioned several times in the novel. It is Eliza's favourite book and she quotes directly from it on p. 249 re 'The Mean Reds'.

There are many parallels between *Jasper Jones* and *TKAM*. Both deal with racism in small country towns, both explore the disconnect between law and justice and both create a world of moral

opposites that somehow co-exist. So in *TKAM* Mrs Dubose has the moral courage to wean herself off morphine before she dies. But she is vicious towards Scout and Jem about their father's 'lawing for niggers and trash'. Mr Underwood, the editor of the *Maycomb Tribune*, 'despises Negroes, won't have one near him',¹ but has his gun trained, unseen, on the mob that comes for Tom Robinson. Maycomb is angry with and disturbed by Atticus Finch, but elects him unopposed to the state legislature even after the trial. Maycomb County's middle class ladies hold missionary teas extolling Christian virtues yet mutter among themselves about 'sulky darkies' discontented by the outcome of the trial. Miss Gates leads Scout's class in a chorus of 'We are a democracy' and feels sorry for the Jews in Hitler's Germany yet leaves the trial saying that 'it's time somebody taught 'em a lesson, they were gettin' way above themselves, an' the next thing they think they can do is marry us'.²

There are several character parallels between the two books.

Mad Jack Lionel/Boo Radley

Mad Jack Lionel: 'Mad Jack is a character of much speculation and intrigue for the kids of Corrigan. No child has actually laid eyes on him. There are full-chested claimants of sightings and encounters, but they're quickly exposed as liars. But the tall stories and rumours all weave wispily around one single irrefutable fact: that Jack Lionel killed a young woman some years ago and he's never been seen outside his house since...A popular test in Corrigan is to steal something from the property of Mad Jack Lionel. Rocks and flowers and assorted debris are all rushed back proudly from the high dry-grass sprawl of his front yard to be examined with wonder. But the rarest and most revered feat is to snatch a peach from the large tree that grows by the flank of the cottage like a zombie's hand bursting from a grave. To pilfer and eat a peach from the property of Mad Jack Lionel assures you instant royalty'. (pp. 3-4)

Boo Radley: 'Inside the house lived a malevolent phantom. People said he existed, but Jem and I had never seen him. People said he went out at night when the moon was high, and peeped in windows. When people's azaleas froze in a cold snap, it was because he had breathed on them. Any stealthy crimes committed in Maycomb were his work. Once the town was terrorized by a series of morbid nocturnal events: people's chickens and household pets were found mutilated; although the culprit was Crazy Addie, people still looked at the Radley Place, unwilling to discard their initial suspicions'. (p. 15)

What purpose do the Boo Radleys and Mad Jack Lionel's of the world fulfil?

In *TKAM* Scout and Jem are obsessed with the idea of touching the Radley place and passing a note to Boo; just as in *Jasper Jones* the children are obsessed with stealing peach pits from Mad Jack Lionel.

In what ways is Jasper Jones a Boo Radley parallel too?

¹ Harper Lee, ch. 16, p. 159

² Harper Lee, ch. 26, p. 251

Other parallels: Laura Wishart and Mayella Ewell; Jasper Jones and Tom Robinson; Warwick Trent and the Ewells (Trent described p. 57)

Charlie suggests that his father is also an Atticus figure though without Atticus' courage. 'He should have been a lawyer, like Atticus Finch. But he'd have to stand up for something then' (p. 102). Just as Jem and Scout change their views on their father when he squares off against the rabid dog, Charlie sees his father differently when he defends An Lu from his attackers.

'He stands up, tall and intimidating. He glares with real anger. And I can't help but feel a blush of pride seeing it. I've been wrong about him' (p. 204).

Silvey makes these parallels explicit by having a 'gnashing and barking' dog in the back of the attackers' ute (p. 203)

Perhaps the real Atticus figure in the novel, however, is Jasper Jones himself. For all he is stereotyped and scapegoated, Jasper is remarkably free of bitterness. He seems to understand the need the Corrigan townsfolk have of his image, and doesn't resent them for it (In this he is more like Atticus than Charlie is). Indeed, at points Jasper seems to directly paraphrase Atticus.

'It's a big thing for me to trust you, Charlie. It's dangerous. And I'm askin you to do the same. I can't force you to do nuthin. But I hoped you might see things from my end. That's what you do, right? When you're readin. You're seeing what it's like for other people'. (p.22)

Similarly Atticus says "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it"³.

Australian Culture

What is Silvey's take on Australian culture?

There is a suggestion that the culture, at least as it existed in Australia in the mid 60s, is anti-intellectual and yobbish. Charlie is mercilessly teased for his broad vocabulary. Every word he uses that is beyond monosyllabic earns him a beating in the playground by the moronic Warwick Trent. Trent has been kept down two grades but is lauded by his coterie of chums for his sporting prowess and physical presence. By the end of the novel, Trent has 'knocked up' a local girl and is back at school.

There is a marked tolerance of alcoholism in powerful figures. Mr Wishart – shire president – is an acknowledged drunk. It does not appear to occur to anyone that his alcohol intake disqualifies him from public office. Eliza says, when Laura disappears, 'My dad is just trying to be normal, which means, you know, stinking of beer and yelling a lot'. (p.89) 'First he just refused to admit she'd gone missing. Now it's as though he never had another daughter. He's blocked it all out. He's blocked everything out really. Which must be easy when you're drunk all the time'. (p. 173). Wes (Charlie's father) confirms Eliza's view of her father's drunkenness when he says – at the cricket match – 'I

³ Ch3, p. 35

don't think he moved too far from the bar. He had a few under his belt' p. 192. The head of the local constabulary, the Sarge, is puking his guts into a drain on New Year's Eve (p. 244).

Marginalised characters like Jasper and Jeffrey earn respect, however momentary, through their sporting prowess. On one level, sport acts as a great leveller. Corrigan cheers Jasper during AFL games and lauds him as a hero. However, the acceptance is temporally specific. Within hours of the game the people who cheered him will cut their eyes away if they see Jasper on the street (p. 60). Similarly, Jeffrey's extraordinary cricketing prowess changes his peers' views.

'...during the changeover, a runner skips out with a drink and a message. The game must be close. I see Jeffrey accept the cup and nod his head. I can scarcely believe it. Not only have they furnished Jeffrey Lu with a refreshing drink, but they're conveying information like he's a real teammate' (p. 180)

'In this frightened town, Jeffrey Lu, it's shortest, slightest occupant, is fearless' p. 181

When the Blackburn cricketer blocks Jeffrey's way:

'The Corrigan crowd is livid with injustice. They holler and remonstrate from the boundary after the unfair bump. I smile. Not for the first time this summer, the world has turned on its head. They're screaming on Jeffrey's behalf. They've got his back, they're on his side' (pp. 181-182)

'Those belligerent bastards, yelling 'Shot, Cong!' across the field, at once turning an insult into a nickname'. p. 182

Their support, though, is fickle. In a parallel of Jasper's experience, within hours of Jeffrey's sporting heroics, his father is attacked and their beautiful garden razed.

Charlie eventually earns immunity from the bullies through his 'bravery' in stealing peaches from Mad Jack Lionel who – by this stage – is an acquaintance and soon-to-be friend of Charlie's. Ironically, it is not Mad Jack Lionel that Charlie is afraid of but the bees hovering over the fruit.

Language and Narrative Technique

There are many different 'ways of speaking' in *Jasper Jones*. Although all the characters speak English, there are several different idioms and modes of expression that reflect class, ethnicity and emotional/psychological states.

Charlie is precocious and literary minded. He savours words and is consciously literary in his modes of expression. Consider:

- 'sigh a shaft of air through my nostrils' p. 18
- 'dismayed by a shard of knowing' p.14
- 'a fresh sluice of sickness and fear' p.21
- 'she looks strained with a distant worry' p. 29

- ‘The sun is coming like a harbinger of doom’ p.37
- ‘I feel a little piqued’ p. 108
- ‘Eliza Wishart has taken my appetite, Laura has stolen my slumber’. p. 218

At times, Charlie channels the voices of literary characters he is familiar with. The following is an echo of the voice of Holden Caulfield from J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (or perhaps even the hyper-masculine world weariness of Norman Mailer whom Charlie also reads):

‘...I realise I’ve been betrayed by the two vices that fiction promised me I’d adore. Sal Paradise held up bottles of booze like a housewife in a detergent commercial. Holden Caulfield reached for his cigarettes like an act of faith. Even Huckleberry Finn tapped on his pipe with relief and satisfaction. I can’t trust anything. If sex turns out to be this bad, I’m never reading again. At this rate it will probably burn my dick and I’ll end up with lesions’ (p.33)

The imaginative and metaphorical landscape that Charlie shares with Eliza – revolving around the Manhattan of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* – is markedly different to the one Charlie shares with Jeffrey (best described as ‘banter’) and different again to that shared with Jasper. What do these different modes of speaking signify?

Jasper’s voice is far more colloquial than Charlie’s. He uses a range of ‘Australianisms’ that Charlie does not have: ‘carn’, ‘fersure’, ‘unnerstand’, ‘nuthin’, ‘sometthink’, ‘orright’. Why does Silvey do this?

Charlie notices that Eliza’s mode of speaking subtly changes during the course of her ideal. She adopts a slightly more British, clipped enunciation, presumably in imitation of her idol Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. Why does Eliza adopt this ‘voice’? What are its uses?

Ruth has a very particular voice designed to do very particular things. ‘My mother is the most sarcastic person in the universe. My father calls it Droll Wit, but I think it’s more or less an opportunity to get up my arse without appearing unreasonable’. (p.44) Is Charlie correct in his analysis of his mother’s use of language?

‘Jasper Jones has a terrible reputation in Corrigan. He’s a Thief, a Liar, A Thug, a Truant’. (p.5) Why does Silvey capitalise these adjectives? What point is he making?

When Eliza discloses to Charlie (p. 250 – 258) Silvey stops using paragraphs and indentation, creating one very long paragraph. Why does he do this?

Suggested Further Reading

Robert Drewe, *The Shark Net*

Truman Capote, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*

J.D. Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye*

Steve Toltz, *A Fraction of the Whole*

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Allen and Unwin Reading Guide:
http://www.allenandunwin.com/_uploads/BookPdf/ReadingGroupGuide/9781741757743.pdf