John Marsden: Writing the War

After the Program Discussion

1. Source

- In what ways have adults treated the teenagers at the start of the novel? Give examples.
- How do we see the characters acting later? Give examples of their growing initiative and sense of responsibility.
- How are they changed when given added freedom and responsibility?

2. Influences

- What resources would anyone have to draw on in a war/crisis situation – do you think these are only the province of adults?
- Can you think of any stories you have read or heard about involving resourcefulness and courage in children – for example, the children in P.O.W. or concentration camps during the last war? Or children caught up in the Bosnian crisis?

3. A Country Setting

- Do you think there is a difference in the lives lived by ‘rural’s’, as Ellie calls them, as opposed to city kids?
- List all of the activities that each of the characters in the novel involved and their family lives – how might this equip them to cope better, later?
- Is there anyone who is not – why? How do they change and why?
4. **Target Audience**

- How important is “audience” in any writing?
- Think of a simple story line and imagine three different audiences/age/gender social groups – how would your structure/language/events themes etc. change to cater for each of these audiences?

5. **Planning**

- Talk about the importance of planning – to what extent, and in what situations, can it be important?
- What are the purposes – extrinsic and intrinsic – of writing? What can we get out of it?

6. **Ellie’s Conscience**

- Who else in the novel wrestles with matters of conscience?
- What do you think the general conscience of the novel is – what are Marsden’s messages?

7. **Other Characters**

- Look at the unique characteristics of each of the characters in the novel. Try brainstorming these in a group, until you have an exact sense of them and their uniqueness.
8. **Status**

- How does the status of any of the characters change in the course of the novel?
- Track these changes in at least two of the characters.

9. **Hard Times**

- Recall a scene or two from the novel, in which we can see two or more things happening. How does this affect you as a reader?

10. **Hell**

- List all the physical characteristics of the novel’s setting – to what extent does this match your or others’ notions of the mythical Hell. If it does not, what do you think Marsden’s message is about the very concept of Hell?
- What else can the notion of Hell apply to or be created by?
- If it is not a place, what constitutes “Hell” to you?
11. The Hermit-Subplot

• Can you identify any other sub-plots in the story – the romances perhaps?
• In what way(s) do we see the complexity of the characters – who are at times reprehensible, whilst at the same time being capable of great strength and goodness? Where do we see this complexity in the novel – in what events?

12. Background Detail

• Choose one section of the novel and look particularly at the setting and time – analyse the background detail – what do you notice about this? Does it seem authentic to you? Do the characters act as you would expect for this setting/situation?
• Try changing the feel of this section by changing the setting and time – what differences are necessary and why?

13. Foreground

• Track at least six significant events in the story – how would you describe them? How do they liven up and/or change the direction of the narrative?
• How can you practice this device in your own writing?
14. Relationships

• Think of some of the male writers you know and some of the female – do you agree with Marsden’s comment? Give reasons.
• In the novel there are other changes to relationships – whose? Why and how do these become of interest?

15. Humour

• Think of examples of humour in the novel. Can you see any pattern in the timing of it? (Some writers use it to lighten, and therefore emphasise the heavier, more profound times in their work).

16. Reflection

• Obviously John Marsden intends us to respect the characters in this novel – by having them grow as human beings he ensures this. Think of at least three sections in the novel where one or more of the characters recognise something profound about life – what they have learned from their experiences’’.
17. Who are the Invaders?

- Getting away from the nationality of the invaders is a useful thing – would you agree that that does not matter as much as any group’s capacity to be aggressive, fanatical, invasive, and brutal? Where have we seen evidence of this in the past or today? Try to think of as many examples as you can so as to demonstrate this negative human potential in any society and/or national group.

18. Marketing

- The issue here might be an interesting one for students to research – related to such things as royalty rates etc. Who benefits most from the books that are published – the writer or the publisher? What proportion of the selling price goes to the author, the publisher, the wholesaler and the retailer?

19. Finally

- For one morning, track all the times you find yourself telling a story and all the times someone tells you one. Keep a log of these stories. Do you think that John Marsden is right about our being story-tellers.
- Develop one of these stories into a written-down one of your own. Try to incorporate some of the tips you have learned from this program. At the end of the exercise you could write a cover statement explaining which of these you adapted or remembered to incorporate in your piece.