

AL CAPSELLA AND THE WATCHDOGS

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JUDITH CLARKE

Teaching Guide

By Gillian Perdue

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This book has been chosen for use in the junior cycle of secondary schools because it is entertaining, thought-provoking and deals sensitively with such themes as:

- Developing boy/girl relationships
- Family interaction
- Adolescent concerns and worries
- Parental fears/hopes
- Exam pressure
- Growing up and developing responsibility

SUMMARY

Al is a typical sixteen-year-old trying to survive in the no-man's-land between childhood and the adult world. Real Life and all that goes with it is fast approaching: exams, career choices, relationships, responsibilities and expectations. Al hangs around with his buddies, Lou, Oz and James and they try to avoid the worst excesses of the Watchdogs, mothers who stalk the suburbs ever-vigilant to the perils of Parties, Late Night Walks, and other suspicious activities. To make matters worse, Al is the recipient of unwelcome attentions from Sophie Disher who may/may not require love-bites and other unfamiliar activities. Al has much to learn. Things heat up when his grandparents are forced to come to stay after a freak flood in their neighbourhood. Al manages to show sensitivity to his nagging grandmother, let Sophie down gently and begin working towards a career he's really interested in. All this while making a new friendship with Kelly and being a good friend to his stressed-out pals. This is an excellent novel with some

hilariously ironic scenes and poignant moments. Watchdogs would love it too!

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the novel has been divided into five main sections, covering five or more chapters at a time. However, the pace at which the story is read is entirely up to the teacher. It may suit to read one chapter per day, or in larger blocks. Possible discussion points and language-based activities are listed at the end of each section.

UNIT 1

SUMMARY

We first meet the lads: Al, Lou and James, friends since finger-painting days in Mrs Drago's kindergarten. They have less than two years left in school and Real Life looms large and dangerous. They seem caught between two worlds, neither children nor adults. Laburnum, their neighbourhood, is a boring place where everybody is in bed by 10.30. Even the one-time hard guy, Tatts Logan, now wears a suit, mows his lawn and cleans his gutter on Saturdays, like everyone else. The boys' mothers are to be seen standing on porches, snooping at street corners, some even pretend to be jogging in the locality in an effort to remain vigilant to the perils of parties and other suspect activities. These are the Watchdogs. The only excitement for the lads in this unit is a hair-dying experiment and an illicit cigarette.

Read pp.1–36.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Boredom** What are the earliest signs of the boredom the boys are experiencing? Why do you think they are lacking motivation?
- **Insults** Al calls his parents Mr and Mrs Capsella, tells his father to 'rack off' and describes his mother's hair as 'old kelp'. What is your opinion of the relationship he has with his parents? How would that relationship compare with the one James has with his anxious mother?
- **Changing appearances** On p.10, we read that because the boys are no longer small and 'cute', people think they're perverts or tell them to move along. Some even seem not to recognise them. After adolescence, is there any sign left of the child that once was there? Do some adults resist the changes that take place during adolescence? Why might this be so?
- **Careers** Al seems to have a real interest in a particular line of work. Read the unit and discuss the signs that Al has thought of something 'worth doing'. What careers/jobs do you consider worth doing?

ACTIVITIES

1. PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS In this unit, we read of the pressure the boys are under due to parental expectations. Imagine your parent(s) or guardians could write the script for your future. What would they want for you?

Write a piece from a parent's perspective entitled: My Son or Daughter, the nuclear physicist/teacher/doctor/politician (free choice!)

2. ADVERTISEMENT Al declares that no firm would make a dye the colour of his mother's hair.

Write a series of advertisements for hair colour, giving examples of colours that would or wouldn't sell.

3. PERSONALITY PROFILE There are signs that Al is sensible and reliable, though some adults might not see this.

List instances where Al demonstrates his maturity (pp.9, 23, 26, 33).

4. BENEVOLENT NEGLECT Read p.27 again. There is a school of thought which recommends this approach to bringing up children. Organise a class debate on the motion: 'When I'm a parent, I'm going to neglect my kids. It's healthier.'

5. POSSIBILITIES Al likes his mum's friend, Dasher, because she makes you feel that life is 'full of possibilities.' Consider the possibilities for your life and write a piece outlining them. Remember, anything is possible.

UNIT 2

SUMMARY

Al attends his first Human Development lesson much to the teacher's disapproval. His mum asks him to bring Oswald Padkin to a party at the weekend. Oswald's mother is concerned about her son's social development, with due cause as it turns out. Al and Lou call to Oswald's house and enter his room. There is a strange smell and Al briefly wonders if the brainy Oswald has begun glue-sniffing as a result of exam pressure. There is a brief discussion of this with Al's sensible thoughts on the matter, but it appears that the smell had been caused by Oswald's glueing a piece of carpet onto his newly-shaved head. James, too, has been feeling the pressure. He doesn't go to the party, saying he has to study.

Read pp.37–67.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Streaming by ability Why do you think the children's reading groups were called 'lions', 'tigers' and 'elephants'? Do you think it had the desired effect of protecting the children from knowing their ability rating? What is your

opinion of streaming?

- Debating techniques Ms Rock backs up her arguments by saying; 'I've done Research.' What do you think of this as a method of proving an argument (p.37)?
- Household labour On p.39, we read that Emma doesn't think it's fair to make little kids do the washing-up before school. What chores do you have to/choose to undertake in your home? Are they allocated fairly according to age and sex? At what age do you think it is fair to assign tasks to children?
- Job satisfaction Do you think Ms Rock is happy in her job? What signs have you noticed that she might be under stress? Would you stay in a job that you found stressful?
- Political correctness What are the two other names for Human Development mentioned in this unit? Why do you think the names were changed? Do you think that this subject is now regarded as a 'proper academic discipline'?

ACTIVITIES

1. DEBATE On p.38, we read that a class discussion was hotting up on the subject of women's lives changing for the better. Discuss the advantages/disadvantages of life a hundred years ago, for both men and women. Compare this with our modern lifestyle. Organise a class debate on the motion: 'I'd rather be a man/woman living now than 100 years ago.'

2. GLORY-BOX This is a container in which a young woman collects linen, cutlery etc in anticipation of marriage. What is the US equivalent called? What do we call it? Conduct a survey among parents and friends to establish if this practice is alive and well or dying out. Write a short piece detailing your opinion of the practice.

3. PIONEER'S DIARY Imagine you are one of the first settlers to arrive in Australia from these shores.

Write a diary of your daily routine, hopes and fears in this new world. (You may need to consult an encyclopaedia or history book to aid your research.)

4. WRITE A GRADE-ONE READER On p.51, there is the hilarious image of Oswald and Gabriel silently tossing a ball to each other. Do you remember your first or early

reader? Try to obtain some early readers to study and discuss. Do they look appealing and interesting?

Write a beginner's reader, introducing any characters or pets you like.

5. NIGHTMARE DIALOGUE Read again Mrs Padkin's anxious questions on pp.62–63. Discuss common parental fears and worries.

Write a nightmare dialogue between a parent or guardian and teenager that begins with the question: 'Where are you going?' Act out in class.

UNIT 3

SUMMARY

Al, Lou and the strangely attired Oz head off to the party in Macca's house. Al tries to avoid the attentions of Sophie/Garnet and spends some time chatting to Kelly, a positive character with a laid-back attitude to life. Oswald manages to get drunk accidentally. After witnessing the pathetic sight of Mr and Mrs Macleod (Macca's parents) sitting shivering in the garden shed outside the party, it's time to go and the boys drag the inebriated Oz home. They leave him on the grass outside his house, sleeping. They were too scared of the anxious Mrs Padkin's reaction to bring him inside. Al learns that Garnet has phoned and Mrs Capsella has arranged for him to call to her house for tea – a prospect he does not relish.

Read pp.68–95.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Changing appearance Discuss possible reasons for the boys' 'scared, shrinking feeling' on catching sight of their reflections (p.74).
- Forbidden fruit tastes all the sweeter On p.68, Oz gorges himself on meat pies. What makes him overindulge to such an extent? Is there any food you have been forbidden to eat? Do you think it is a good idea to try out certain foods and drinks (including alcohol) in an effort to learn moderation and control?
- Self-image What is the relevance of Al's identification with the picture on the front cover of *The Shaking of the Foundations*? Would you agree that adolescence is a

time when fundamental principles are challenged? Is there any picture that you identify with in a similar way?

- **Guilt** Do you agree with Al's theory that 'girls make you feel guilty when you haven't really done anything'? What has/hasn't Al done in Garnet's case?
- **Change** Discuss the differences between Kelly's and Al's attitudes to change (p.75).
- **Meaning** In Al's school, what does it mean if a girl asks you to tea and you go? Would this have the same meaning in your school? Discuss meaningful actions that exist in your school, e.g. carrying someone's books, wearing/not wearing a ring/chain, sitting with someone at break, and so on.

ACTIVITIES

1. **ADVERTISING** Imagine you run a pie-making business catering for people who want to grab a quick meal on the go.

Write the brochure outlining your produce. Describe your pies in an appetising fashion, giving details of their contents and ingredients. Give catchy names to your products (see p.68: 'Tubby Tom, Slurpmaster').

2. **FAT** Read p.73 and discuss why Kelly stopped worrying about her weight. Why might it be considered a sign of beauty to be plump in India? Why, in our plentiful western society, is thinness seen as a desirable state of being? Collect and view magazine or other photos of beautiful women from the past. What are their chances of being super-models today?

Organise a debate on the motion: 'The "ideal" shape of the modern woman is unattainable and unnatural.' Discuss the same topic substituting 'man' for 'woman'.

3. **RUMOURS** What is your opinion of the rumour about Glix's activities late at night in his empty shop (p.82)? Are there any rumours or superstitions in your school/locality?

Write a piece (factual or fictional), describing late-at-night strange happenings in your school or neighbourhood.

4. **SURVEY** As a whole class exercise, write a list of parents' worst-case scenarios, e.g., 'your child got mugged', 'your child had a car accident', 'your child has taken heroin'. Lay out in form of a questionnaire

and ask parents/guardians to rate fears on scale of 1 to 10.

Collate information and discuss in class. What do parents fear most?

5. **JOKES** Make a Joke Book of the worst jokes you've heard (see Mr Capsella's). Tip: consult some young children.

UNIT 4

SUMMARY

Though the stress of the impending tea-party causes Al to catch a bad cold, by Sunday he is recovered and walks over to Garnet's house. On the way, he meets a strange, furtive-looking man smoking a cigarette. The man asks Al not to mention their meeting to anyone. The tea-party does not begin well. Al is almost an hour early and passes some time chatting uneasily with Mrs Disher. He has determined to let Garnet know that he is not interested in her romantically, but things don't come out quite right as she edges up beside him on the sofa. However, after some minor embarrassment, he makes his position clear and Garnet, though miffed, declares that she feels the same way. Back home, it's Mr and Mrs Capsella's turn to panic. Mrs Capsella's aged parents have been rendered temporarily homeless by a flood and will have to come and stay.

Read pp.96–131.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Mixed feelings** Read p.96 where Al imagines Garnet looking after him and discuss his mixed emotions. He later asks: 'Why did Garnet worry me so much?' Discuss possible answers to this question.
- **Privacy** Al tells Garnet that his Mum would have opened any card and shown it to him. Do you think this is true? If so, what is your opinion of this practice? If not, can you suggest possible reasons for this lie?
- **Breaking-up** Is the theme: 'I like you a lot, but not in that way' an original phrase for finishing a relationship? Discuss ways in which a relationship can be ended. What causes most pain? Is there a painless way to part?
- **Nudity** Al is appalled by the thought

of seeing Garnet naked, which causes him to conclude that there is definitely something wrong with him. Do you agree? What might be causing his feelings of panic and discomfiture?

- **Exam pressure** Discuss the various tough poses of the guys in Year Twelve as they pretend never to have heard the word 'exam' (pp.110–111). Do final year students in your school display any signs of exam pressure?

ACTIVITIES

1. **SIGMUND FREUD (1856–1939)** was an Austrian psychiatrist and founder of modern psychoanalysis. He theorised that important emotions and memories were lodged in the unconscious mind and did much research into dreams as, he believed, they provide a window into the unconscious. Read pp.96–97 and discuss the possible meaning of Al's dream.

Write about an interesting dream you had. Do you ever have nightmares or, worse, recurring nightmares? Can you psychoanalyse your own dream?

2. **FOOT-SPLATS** Why do you think Mrs Disher was not impressed by Al's reassurance that 'there are some really gross-looking types on the beach these days' (p.104)?

Have you ever managed to insult someone unintentionally? Write the dialogue that occurred.

3. **VOCABULARY EXTENSION** These words appear in this unit. Write definitions for each, referring to a dictionary if necessary:

callous, slinking, apprehensive, gimlet, mortuary, floundered, agoraphobic, synonym, withering, surmounted.

4. **FINAL MOMENTS** On p.111, Al sees his life flashing in front of his eyes like a drowning person.

What images would appear before you in a similar situation? Write an account.

5. **TATTS LOGAN'S DIARY** After many years of ruling the roost as the neighbourhood hard guy, Tatts Logan has finally been brought to heel by marriage and toddler twins. Do you think he misses his old life?

Write a diary entry for Tatts where he looks back on his glorious youth and contrasts it

with present day circumstances.

UNIT FIVE

SUMMARY

After a hair-raising trip to and from the airport, the Blounts (Mrs Capsella's parents), move into Al's household. Mr Blount settles in well and enjoys imposing order on the unruly garden. But Pearly doesn't adjust so well. She's unhappy and unsettled and spends her time criticising Al and his mother. She also reveals herself to be the mother of all watchdogs causing torment for Mrs Capsella and Al in equal measure. Oz and Sophie have become an item with the result that Al feels not jealous, but sort of left-behind. Mrs Capsella has writer's block and Al surprises himself by inviting the lovely Kelly to a party. But the watchdog has to go. The prowler is revealed to be Mr Disher smoking secretly while on a long walk with Mr Blount. The anxiety caused by the lengthy (unscheduled) absence of Mr Blount causes Pearly to pack her bags. They leave and order is restored.

Read pp.131–164.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Sensitivity Al is good at seeing things

from another's perspective. Discuss in relation to the scene with his Gran on p.133.

- Teenage rebellion Pearly believes that reading stunts your growth. Discuss Mrs Capsella's choice of career in the context of her mother's opinion.
- Irony Read p.141, where Mrs Capsella bemoans her mother's watchdog activities. Ask your parent(s) if they ever find themselves behaving exactly as their own parents did. What does this tell us about growing up and the human condition?
- Left behind Discuss Al's feeling of being left behind on 'an empty platform' (p.138). Do you think he should have gone out with Sophie?
- Communication Al believes that Mrs Capsella and her parents 'were on such totally different wavelengths that communication was virtually impossible'. Is the same true for Al and the Capsellas?

ACTIVITIES

1. **BOOK TITLES** Gran likes to read Nurse books with titles such as: Nurse Sweetly Takes the Plunge. Write the opening pages of this novel, including a description of Nurse Sweetly.

Alternatively, write a list of book titles for a person interested in Horror/Romance/

Murder/other.

2. **LIMERICKS** Finish the limerick begun by Oz on p.140. Write limericks for friends in your class.

3. **PROTECTIVENESS** Mrs Capsella laments that Pearly treats her like a child (p.129). What is the effect of this treatment (see pp.141–145)? Oz, too, has been overprotected. What antisocial behaviour has he begun to indulge in (see p.139)? Organise a class debate on the motion: 'The more they try to control me, the more uncontrollable I become.'

4. **DISCUSS NIETZSCHE** Do you agree with Lou that it's depressing to see Tatts Logan reduced to being nagged and called Malcolm? Imagine the twins have grown up and are in their teens. Do you think they will be allowed much freedom?

Discuss this quotation from Nietzsche: 'Freedom is the will to be responsible to ourselves.'

5. **LESSONS LEARNED** Do you agree with Al that, after all they'd been through, his mother hadn't learned a thing? What has Al learned?

Write a conversation between Al and Kelly on their way to the party where he talks about what he has learned.

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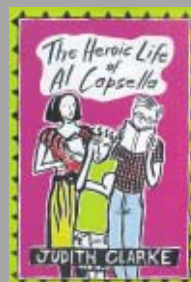
JUDITH CLARKE was born and educated in Sydney, Australia, and now lives in Melbourne with her husband and son. She has worked as a teacher, librarian and lecturer. She has also published novels for younger readers, and short stories and poetry in magazines. Her well-received Al Capsella novels and her collection of stories, *The Boy on the Lake*, were first published in Australia and subsequently in the USA.

Also by Judith Clarke, the first Al Capsella story:

The Heroic Life of Al Capsella

Al Capsella's parents are a constant embarrassment and are definitely not normal. Desperate to be cool, Al devises all sorts of schemes for surviving their unconventional behaviour – until he discovers that being really normal is the strangest thing of all.

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REVIEWS AND AWARDS FOR:

The Heroic Life of Al Capsella

'A very, very funny book'
Gay Byrne Show

'Hilarious Adrian Moleish lament'
Sunday Independent

Shortlisted for the NSW Premier's
Literary Awards (1988)

Included in the American Library
Association Best Books for Young
Adults list (1990)

AWARDS FOR:

Al Capsella and the Watchdogs
Winner of the Variety Club Young
People's Talking Book of the Year
Award (1990)

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Literary Awards (1990)