

CHEROKEE

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CREINA MANSFIELD

Teaching Guide

By Gillian Perdue

RATIONALE AND THEMES This book has been chosen for use in the senior classes of primary schools and in the junior classes of secondary schools because it combines humour and action with a realistic portrayal of a boy's coming of age. It deals sensitively with some important themes, such as:

- Conflict with authority
- Loss
- Friendship
- Loss of faith in/questioning of role models
- Fulfilling one's potential
- Seeing things from another's perspective

It is also very amusing – the sharp wit and sarcasm of the teenaged Gene has been well observed and portrayed.

SUMMARY

Gene Crawford was orphaned as a baby when his parents were killed in a road accident. He has been brought up by his grandfather, the legendary jazz musician, Cherokee Crawford. Gene has travelled around the world with Cherokee and his band, The Calumets, and enjoys this life of music, adventure and excitement. However, all is set to change when his Aunt Joan decides that it is now time for some 'Discipline and Education'. Gene has to go and live with Aunt Joan and his wimpy cousin, Wesley, and he finds their company tortuous. The social services are keeping a close eye on him, and Aunt Joan refuses to let him play his beloved clarinet. He begins a diary, or rather two diaries – one for himself and one for his aunt's perusal – he knows she has been

reading his private diary while cleaning his room. Gene plans his escape with the help of the now not-so-wimpy Wesley and heads to Dublin with Cherokee. Meanwhile, Gene learns that initial judgements about people can be misleading and that his hero, Cherokee, has feet of clay. He grows up quickly through questioning some of his most cherished beliefs and emerges as a more mature and likeable person.

APPROACH For the purposes of this exploration the novel has been divided into five main sections, covering four or five chapters at a time. However, the pace at which the novel 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 activities are listed at the end of each section.

UNIT 1 GENE, CHEROKEE, AUNT JOAN AND WESLEY

SUMMARY

We meet Gene, already incarcerated in Aunt Joan's impossibly clean house on Zig Zag Road. He describes his hitherto idyllic lifestyle on the road with Cherokee. He outlines his family tree and gives descriptions of Mrs Walmsley, the social worker, and of his grandfather, Cherokee. He begins keeping his diaries.

Read pp.7–32.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- 'If you can find a way to earn a living doing what you want to do anyway, then you're one of the luckiest people in the world' (p.11). Do you agree?
- Does Gene mean it as a criticism of his grandfather when he says that he 'didn't give me fifty thousand rules to obey'?
- Though his parents are dead, Gene definitely has a family. Who fills the role of parent for Gene? Has it been sufficiently fulfilled up to now?
- Gene judges people harshly. Discuss.

ACTIVITIES

1. WRITING

Gene uses exaggeration to great effect to describe some of Aunt Joan's most irritating habits. Write an account, fictional or factual, of a real incident that happened to you. Now re-write your account employing wild exaggeration.

2. COMPARISON

Chapter 2 is an affectionate description of Cherokee, grandfather and hero! Compare this with Gene's sarcastic, harsh description of Aunt Joan in Chapter 1. Examine Chapters 1 and 2 and list ten phrases from each that demonstrate Gene's opinion of these people.

3. SCRIPT WRITING

Write a script for the patronising interview that Gene had with Mrs Walmsley, the social worker assigned to his case. Act out the script in class.

4. X-CERTIFICATE DIARY

Gene begins keeping two diaries. He imagines shocking the interfering Mrs

Walmsley with a horror diary. Write a diary entry that would utterly shock people if they read it.

5. CLASS DEBATE

Discuss the motion: 'Nobody should ever read another person's diary.'

6. DESIGNER LIFESTYLE

On p.14, Gene describes the incident where he was left behind on a Caribbean island. Look up St. Kitts in an atlas and find out about its climate, people, industries etc. Gene had gone to St Kitts aboard the QE 2. Use a web search or encyclopaedia to find out about this ship. Write either a factual, informative piece about this beautiful cruising vessel or a fictional account of a cruise you (world-famous multi-millionaire) had aboard the QE 2.

UNIT 2 LIFE IN ZIG ZAG ROAD

SUMMARY

Gene simply cannot accept life with Aunt Joan in Zig Zag Road. Aunt Joan nags constantly and refuses to let him play his clarinet. She is obsessed with cleaning, and provides meals so inedible that Gene begins to understand why Wesley is so thin. Gene plans to take revenge by sending a video tape of his aunt to a TV programme. Wesley reveals that he is keen on Cherokee's music, and he demonstrates his budding musical skills to Gene. Gene is forced to revise his opinion of Wesley.

Read pp.33–59.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- An apology should mean that the offence is forgotten. Discuss this statement with reference to Aunt Joan and Cherokee (see p.34).
- When Gene and Wesley start going to school together, Gene has to begin revising his first impression of his cousin. Why is this?
- Do you think the tape of Aunt Joan will be funny? Why does Gene not find it quite as funny on the day it is broadcast (see conversation on p.59)?

- Have you ever been forced to revise your opinion of someone? What was it that changed your mind? Was the revision positive or negative? Discuss in class possible reasons Why a person might give an inaccurate impression of themselves. (For example, nervousness, trying too hard to be cool, trying too hard to be funny, self-consciousness.)

ACTIVITIES

1. WRITE AND ANALYSE

On p.57, Gene says: 'I'm beginning to understand Wes better now.' Later, on p.59, he learns some information that helps him understand Aunt Joan better too.

Write a paragraph outlining the important information Gene learned about these characters.

2. GUESSING GAME

On p.42, a game show called Guess What? is described. As a class activity, write a series of questions that friends might know the answers to. Then divide into pairs and play Guess What? in class.

3. READ AND LIST EXAMPLES

Gene has a good sense of humour and is very witty when describing Aunt Joan's dreadful cooking. However, in this section we see that Wesley can also be witty and the two cousins are getting on better. Read pp.43, 44, 49, 54 and list examples of Wesley's wit.

4. WRITING

'I've seen enough of my friends' mothers to know they don't all behave like Mussolini,' observes Gene on p.35.

See what you can discover about Benito Mussolini, either using a search engine on the Internet or an encyclopaedia. Write a short paragraph about him.

5. CLASS DISCUSSION

Denial is a word used in psychology to describe when a person simply can't accept the truth and therefore denies it.

Read p.59 again and find an example of Gene's denial. Discuss this in class.

6. GAME SHOW

Imagine you are the head of a TV station's Creative Team. Your brief is to devise a

new game show for any age-group.

What format would the show take? What would the prizes be? Who would present the show?

Write about your show and think of a catchy slogan for it.

UNIT 3 LIFE IS NOT A LAF!

SUMMARY

The video of Aunt Joan's wobbling rear, coupled with Cherokee's song, is shown on nationwide TV. The effect on Aunt Joan is devastating and Gene subsequently regrets his actions. He is punished, although Wesley does try to stand up for him. The beach hut is raided and Gene's beloved clarinet is smashed to pieces. Gene presumes that it is the work of the now distraught Aunt Joan. Wesley helps him to escape to his beloved Cherokee.

Read pp.60–84.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- After looking at Aunt Joan's crumpled and flaming face, Gene reconsiders his actions. What do you think are his feelings now?
- At home and in school various forms of punishment are used. Discuss and list these. Which are the most effective? Are any unfair? See p.68 and read Gene's description of Cherokee's form of punishment. Do you consider this to be punishment?
- After the destruction of the beach hut, Gene is very angry. Playing his clarinet used to make him feel less angry. Is anger a bad/unnatural emotion? How do you cope with your anger?
- 'One thing that travelling teaches you is that everyday possessions aren't very important' (p.83). Using the phrase 'possessions aren't very important', organise a class debate on the motion.

ACTIVITIES

1. LIST

Gene sees Aunt Joan venting her anger by 'scrubbing out a dustbin'. Make a list of

some completely pointless activities, for example, combing the grass!

2. WRITE AN ACCOUNT

Gene was 'a second away from apologising' when Aunt Joan said something that changed his mind. What did she say? Has this ever happened to you? Write a short account.

3. WRITE A DIALOGUE

'Of all the people Gene owes an apology to, Wesley is the most deserving'. Discuss this statement. Write a dialogue between Gene and Wesley where Gene apologises. Act out in class.

4. FINDING OUT

Gene still seems to be in denial about Cherokee (p.77). How can he find out the truth? Write four or five questions that Gene should ask Cherokee if/when he sees him again.

5. FAME / NOTORIETY

Gene has experience of being related to someone famous. On p.75, he muses that, soon he's going to know what it's like to be related to someone notorious. Make a list of 10 famous people and another list of notorious ones. Choose one from each list and imagine that you are related to them. Write an article for a Sunday paper about life with this person.

6. POSSESSIONS

Travelling has taught Gene that possessions are not important. If you had to go somewhere in a hurry, what is the minimum you would bring? Draw your case and label the contents.

UNIT 4 GENE MAKES HIS GETAWAY

SUMMARY

Gene meets Cherokee and heads to Dublin with the band. He is surprised that Cherokee doesn't try to contact Aunt Joan. They stay in the Shelbourne Hotel. Aunt Joan and Wesley suddenly appear. Joan apologises for going to the beach hut, but says that it was someone else who wrecked the place. Gene can understand Aunt Joan better, he sees

that her obsession with cleaning and distrust of music stem from her 'shambolic' childhood as daughter of the legendary Cherokee. He decides to confront his grandfather, now that he knows the truth.

Read pp.85–107.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- On meeting Cherokee, Gene half expects his grandfather to stop him running away or to clear it with Aunt Joan first. Why? What does this tell you about Cherokee?
- What do you think Cherokee means when he says: 'Somebody's growing up' about Gene? What had Gene said prior to this which would show his developing maturity?
- Gene's apology to Aunt Joan is on p.105 and begins: 'And if, if I've done anything, well, to apologise for'. Is this a real apology?

ACTIVITIES

1. HOME IS WHERE THE ...

To Gene, home is a Ford Transit van and a place where there are arguments, friendly or serious.

What does home mean to you? Write a piece entitled 'Home' describing your home and your real feelings about it.

2. POINT OF VIEW

Wesley has now read Gene's diaries and has seen what Gene wrote about him. Up until now, their relationship had been improving. What effect do you think this may have on their friendship?

Write a paragraph on Gene from Wesley's point of view.

3. REVENGE IS...

On p.104, Gene says that he thought revenge would feel better.

Can you write an answer to his question: 'Why didn't it feel better?'

4. RESEARCH

One member of the band is nicknamed Red. On a visit to the USA, the FBI thought that he had been so named for his politics. What does it mean to be 'red' in your politics?

Find out as much as you can about

Communism. (Use the Internet or an encyclopaedia.)

5. PLAN AN OUTING

On p.95 we find out where Gene stayed in Dublin and learn that he did a sight-seeing tour of the city.

Plan a class outing to the city of Dublin and try to follow Gene's trail.

UNIT 5 AN ENDING AND A BEGINNING

SUMMARY

Gene confronts Cherokee about his abandonment of his family. Cherokee begins to explain, but there is an interruption and the argument remains unresolved. Gene's perceptions have been altered and he sees that the 'Cherokee, good; Aunt Joan, bad' motto is simply not true. Even his choice of musical instrument has changed – he decides that the saxophone is the instrument for him. Wesley, Gene and his friend, Seamus, form a new jazz band. Gene now keeps only one diary because there is no disparity between what he should think and what he does think. At The Calumets' concert, the family is united for the first time in a generation. The book ends with a new beginning for Gene as he now considers the possibility of being a jazz critic, rather than being in a band like Cherokee. It is left to the talented Wesley to be the world-famous jazz musician of the next generation.

Read pp.108–127.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- On p.109, Gene says: 'It's not that important is it? Music, I mean.' Is this designed to hurt Cherokee? Why does he say this?
- Gene feels that he has only been a substitute in Aunt Joan's house, so why does he blush with shame when he hears how much she enjoyed his visits?
- Gene's perspective on the world has now changed. In what way? How do your parents and loved ones affect the way you look at the world?

- Sometimes people say or do things which are difficult to forgive and forget. Do you think that there are any situations where it might be better to confront the person and have the argument or discussion?

ACTIVITIES

1. CHARACTER SKETCH

Gene's friend, Seamus, is introduced at this late stage in the book. He seems good-natured and cheerful.

Read Chapter 22 again and then do a quick character sketch of Seamus. Draw him and add ten or more adjectives that describe his personality.

2. LIST MESSAGES

Gene uses music to communicate with Cherokee without speaking. Using song titles that you know, list some messages that could be communicated by the songs alone.

For example:

We Gotta Get Out Of This Place = Let's go!

Tell Me Ma = I'll tell on you.

3. FUTURE DIARY

The book finishes with Gene's imaginary diary entry for himself as an adult, a successful writer and jazz critic.

Write a diary entry for a day in your life 15 or 20 years hence. Think big!

4. CLASS DEBATE

Cherokee compares good jazz music to a good family relationship. He then plays random, discordant notes to show what family life had been like for him.

Organise a debate to discuss the motion: 'If there's no tune at all, it's better to part.'

5. THE NEW U2

Imagine that you have been asked to manage your ideal band. Who would you choose to include in the band? Would you perform with the band or would your role be strictly managerial?

Write a publicity piece for the local newspapers and radio shows, announcing a forthcoming gig by your band. You will need to have chosen a name for your band and some song titles and your PR piece will need to be interesting enough

to catch the attention of the local media and potential audience.

6. MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Do you play or have you ever played a musical instrument? Write a short piece about that instrument and why you chose to learn to play it. What do you feel when playing?

If you do not play an instrument, write about that which you would choose if you were going to learn and give reasons for your choice.

7. MUSIC APPRECIATION

Use the Internet, an encyclopaedia or your library to find out more about jazz music. One good jazz album to listen to is Kind of Blue by Miles Davis.


Famous jazz artists mentioned in the novel have released several albums, including:

Fats Waller: Ain't Misbehavin'

Benny Goodman: Essential Recordings

Johnny Hodges (with Duke Ellington): Back to Back

Websites include www.bluenote.com or

www.famousjazz.com  Denotes activities that are suitable for both senior cycle primary school use and junior cycle secondary school use.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR, CREINA MANSFIELD

CREINA MANSFIELD was born in Bristol. She studied literature at Cambridge and later became an English teacher. She lived in Dublin for several years with her husband and two teenage sons, and now lives in Macclesfield, England. Cherokee has been translated into Danish and My Nasty Neighbours into French, Italian and Polish.

Reviews for Cherokee:

'... [with] many insights, conveyed with a light and humorous touch ... Cherokee raises the concept of what being conventional means, and analyses the topics of traditional schooling versus the school of life; growing up, and making the right choices in life.' Lollipops, USA.

'The many real issues raised in this novel are of everyday events involving family dynamics. The plot is plausible and the protagonists credible. A steady tension is evident throughout the story and the sense of resolution is highly satisfactory. Apart from being a good read ... this novel could be useful in English as it provides an example of a diary format.'

Dept of Education, Western Australia.

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