



by Creina Mansfield

Gene Crawford, grandson of the legendary jazz musician Cherokee, has travelled the world with his grandfather's band and has had a happy if unconventional upbringing. But his Aunt Joan is appalled when Cherokee 'loses' his grandson and leaves him for two months on a Caribbean island. She is determined that her nephew should adopt a 'sensible lifestyle', free from the influence of 'filthy music'. The Social Services Department considers it best that Gene should live in 17 Zig Zag Road, a home which is kept obsessively 'nice and clean' by his aunt. At first, Gene is highly critical of his Aunt Joan and cousin Wes. He describes his new lifestyle amusingly in two diaries, one of which he keeps at the request of his social worker. But doubts about his idealised grandfather begin to creep in, and though he attempts to deny the possibility that Cherokee might not be as perfect as he had once believed, he is gradually forced to re-evaluate his illusions about his grandfather, and also about himself.

LANGUAGE – ENGLISH

- ◆ Vocabulary extension: Amble, riffled, defensively, exasperated, hurtling, evasively, shambolic.
- ◆ Word-play: E.g., 'the piece of cod that passeth all understanding' (p.36), 'eggsactly' (p. 43), '... got a black belt in cooking. She can kill with a single chop' (p.54), '... he'd never have stopped laughing if they'd put him on Death Row' (p.43).
- ◆ Idiomatic expressions: E.g., 'he jumped ship' (p.48), 'the worm had turned' (p.100).
- ◆ Literary references: E.g., *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens (p.63), *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (p.95), *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy (p.93). 'Music has charms to soothe a savage breast', from *The Mourning Bride* by William Congreve (p.78).
- ◆ Discussion: '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). Debate the truth of this statement and say if Cherokee was, in fact, lucky.
- ◆ Discussion: 'What's the embarrassment of one person compared to the entertainment of millions' (p.61). Considering television chat-shows and tabloid newspapers in particular, debate the above and try to achieve a class consensus on the importance or otherwise of sensationalist journalism. While it may be regarded as harmless entertainment, can it adversely affect public perceptions?
- ◆ Discussion: '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.
- ◆ Creative: 'Aunt Joan probably had a map of where every object in the house was kept' (p.32). Think of one room in your house and design a word-map, from memory, of every object in that room. Later, check the accuracy of your plan or map.
- ◆ Creative: Many characters in this book have nicknames, some negative and others positive. Discuss the different assumptions which can be based on nicknames, e.g., the FBI officers' reaction to the name Red (p.91). Choose suitable (and charitable!) nicknames for some friends or teachers that would convey something of their personality or appearance to the listener.

◆ Creative: Wes and Gene used colourful and imaginative expressions such as 'a few sandwiches short of a picnic' to describe the strange behaviour of Aunt Joan (p.76). Make a list of other such well-known expressions that would describe similar behaviour and then invent your own.

SPHE

- ◆ Myself: Self-identity. Recognising that each person is a unique individual and that this individuality is expressed in many ways: Through the clothes we wear and through interests and activities pursued. Gene is critical and intolerant, albeit in a humorous manner, of the clothes and interests of his cousin (pp.42, 47) and only gradually does he overcome his preconceived ideas about Wes. Gene himself has little sense of self-identity when he first moves to Zig Zag Road – his diary entries reveal more about his grandfather than about himself. What does this tell us about his self-confidence? Later, his social worker comments that his diary now 'reveals a developing sense of personal identity' (p.72). Discuss the events and insights gained which might have effected this change.
- ◆ Myself: Growing and changing. Exploring patterns of development and growth: Physical, social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. When Cherokee comments that 'Somebody's growing up' (p.89), Gene thinks at first that his grandfather is referring to Wes and it takes a while for him to realise that it is he who has grown and changed. List the ways in which Gene has grown socially and emotionally throughout the book and suggest the main influences on his development.
- ◆ Myself: Safety and protection. Cherokee displays little concern for the safety of his grandson when he 'loses' him on St Kitts in the Caribbean (pp.14, 15). Aunt Joan is appalled that he had been left 'alone in a distant foreign land'. Gene himself had had 'a great time' fishing and swimming with his friend. Compare the reactions of the two adults to the personal safety of the child and suggest which is the more responsible and caring. Examine also Cherokee's lack of curiosity when Gene ran away from his aunt's house, 'not once' did his grandfather ask why he had run away (p.87). Does this attitude show an understanding of the safety issues involved in caring for minors?

- ◆ Myself and others: Myself and my family. Exploring what belonging to a family means; discussing and identifying behaviour that is important for harmony in family life, such as adhering to family rules. Gene regarded the members of the jazz band The Calumets as his family and even drew a family tree detailing their names, ages and occupations (p.23). List the various ways in which these men had fulfilled the role of family. Gene's 'blood' family is at first less important to him than the band and he rejects the rules and regulations imposed by Aunt Joan (p.8), but gradually he learns that his idealised grandfather has been partly responsible for much of her neurotic behaviour (pp.76, 107) and he begins to understand the importance of family (p.109).
- ◆ Myself and others: My friends and other people. Recognising the importance of care and consideration, courtesy and good manners. Cherokee was 'very strict about politeness' (p.28) yet was not always considerate of the feelings of others. He understood Joan's resentment and anger and the reason she blamed her unhappiness on music (pp.103, 110–111), but it never occurred to him that he might change his behaviour or encourage Gene to do likewise. Discuss Cherokee's relationship with the different members of his family and say how these might have fared better with more effective communication. Gene realised that he was being 'self-centred' (p.116), might this adjective also be applied to his grandfather? Think of other adjectives that might better describe Cherokee's personality than the more usual 'legendary'.

MUSIC

- ◆ Listening and responding to music: Recognising, where appropriate, its function and historical context. Listening to excerpts of recordings from famous jazz musicians, such as Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong, Tommy Dorsey, Count Basie, Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington. Also, listen to recordings of drummer Gene Krupa, who played 'Chicago style' jazz and after whom Gene Crawford was named (p.18). Listening and responding to different jazz forms, such as boogie-woogie, bop and swing.