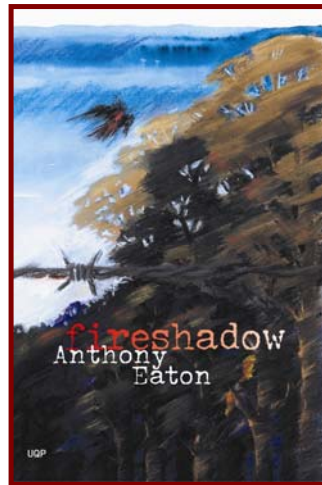


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FIRESHADOW

Anthony Eaton



Teachers' Notes

Written by Roger Watts

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SYNOPSIS

Feeling guilty at the tragic death of his sister in a car crash, Vinnie runs away from the accusations of his parents to the bush, and camps at the site of the Second World War Prison Camp at Marinup. There he meets Helen and her ailing Grandfather, Erich, who are on a pilgrimage to the site. Helen accepts Vinnie, despite his disfigurement, and Erich provides a mentor role for the young man that leads him out of his solitude.

The book's parallel plot structure counterpoints Vinnie's personal journey with that of Erich as a seventeen year old, who, following the ideals of his father, an officer in the Wehrmacht, runs away from his family to fight in the German army in 1944. He is captured in Libya, and eventually finds himself imprisoned at Marinup in Western Australia. There, he rejects the complacency of the other prisoners, considering himself to be still at war. His work as a medical orderly brings him into contact with Dr Alexander, who has himself lost a son in the First World War, and who, despite Erich being an 'enemy', mentors the boy.

Erich has to endure the rivalry of Thomas, a prison guard, over the affections of Alice the Doctor's granddaughter, but he is prevented from developing a relationship with her by his principles. His loyalties are further tested when he is caught stealing from the Doctor's supply cupboard, betraying both Alice and the Doctor. He cannot lose his nationalistic principles until he learns that Hitler has killed his father.

His relationship with Alice is consummated immediately before his repatriation to Germany, where he is needed to look after his sick sister, and he is unable to return to Australia to see his new daughter.

Years later, on a last pilgrimage to the site of the camp, he meets up with Vinnie, with whose help he is able to recover Dr Alexander's final gift. His story provides the momentum for Vinnie to resume his life.

STRUCTURE

The novel is divided into four sections.

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- The first alternates Vinnie's and Erich's story.
- The second part focuses on Erich and his relationship with Alice.
- The third takes something of a departure from the two protagonists and follows Alice, detailing the way she deals with her pregnancy and the way she is ostracized by her community.
- Finally, the alternating narrative structure of the first chapter is repeated as an elderly Erich returns to Australia and meets Vinnie.

This is a complex novel that can successfully be used in a Year 10 or 11 classroom. It has a strong enough storyline to maintain interest for boys and girls. It opens numerous areas for enquiry and provides the stimulus for a range of personal writing. However, this is a substantial book, not necessarily lending itself to reading around the class, but perhaps better suited to more dynamic approaches, allowing students to read at their own pace.

There are many good passages that lend themselves to a closer study.

THEMES

Eaton has a fascination for the way the past influences the present, and in particular how this is achieved within an Australian landscape. This provides the catalyst for the internal changes which he sees as so essential for growth in his characters.

Eaton's characters move from a situation of conflict to a more compassionate place where old enmities can be reconciled, and where racial harmony can be found. The setting for this story, whilst mainly in the Australian bush, includes the European and African theatre of war and spans several generations. A strong sense of landscape infuses almost every scene except perhaps those concerning Alice's story set in Perth. This landscape provides not only the freedom, but also a sense of imprisonment and it is fascinating to explore the way these contradictory elements are developed.

This text speaks to a modern reader familiar with the dilemma of Australia's role in a multicultural world, and indirectly to those troubled by recent migration policies and the treatment of asylum seekers.

This novel can successfully be used to explore the following themes:

- Auto/Biographies
- Bereavement/death
- Cross cultural
- Families
- Freedom

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- Grandparents
- Growing Up
- Historical
- Identity
- Journeys
- War

ACTIVITIES

Some Passages for Closer Study:

Chapter 1

- Look at the opening chapter and explore the way Eaton brings each of his main characters into a new situation.
- Read the first three paragraphs and find examples of phrases Eaton uses to capture Vinnie's sense of:
 - the past - the present
 - peace - disturbance
 - nature - artificiality
 - space - confinement

What is the effect on the reader of these opposites?

Read pp. 7 – 10

Investigate whether the prisons are created:

- naturally (i.e. the bush)
- artificially (i.e. the camp)
- in the mind (i.e. character's attitudes)

Read pages 149 – 151

- What evidence is there that Erich's attempted robbery was premeditated?
- What motives does he have for robbing the doctor?
- What causes him to hesitate?
- In what ways would this be "An act without honour?"

Read Chapter 28

- Both Vinnie and Erich are running away.
- They receive identical advice.

How would you answer the key question that occurs on pp. 314 and 318?

- Why are the answers to this question so important?

CHARACTERS

Parallels

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Eaton parallels the story of the young Erich as a World War 2 soldier with Vinnie's story set in the present time. Many of the supporting characters share similarities.

Design a chart that explores the similarities between the following characters.

Past	Present
Young Erich	Vinnie
Dr Alexander	Old Erich
Alice	Helen
Kaiser/ Paul Alexander	Katia
Alice's Parents	Vinnie's Parents

How do characters change during the course of the book?

Vinnie

"This new Vinnie, who stared back from the greeny-grey surface of the water, this was a different person..." p.27

He is seen as less than human. What makes him so?

"It wouldn't be Vinnie who returned. Not old Vinnie anyway. It would be somebody else." p. 68

Explore the way Vinnie changes as his relationship with Erich and Helen develops?

Erich

"But Erich knew that his silent resistance sent a message to everyone, Australian and German alike, that despite his age he wasn't the sort who would bow to pressure in the face of the enemy." p. 29

Whilst Vinnie at first runs away from his past, Erich attempts to hang on to his. This is seen in his refusal to wear the Australian Issue uniform. Yet, in the company of Dr Alexander and Alice, he does change.

Explore the way in which this occurs.

Consider:-

- His admiration for his father
- His devotion to duty and his country

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- His attitude to Stutt
- His stealing of the scalpel
- His reaction to the death of his father
- His relationship with Gunter
- His attitude to Mathilde and Maria
- How different is Erich after his repatriation to Germany?

MOTIFS**Fire**

Fire is an important motif. Not only does it provide the book's title, it is used as a catalyst for change, both good and bad. It represents the suffering the characters endure, and whilst it is destructive it also provides a cleansing and healing function.

Explain the title of the novel using the following references and any others you can find. There are numerous occurrences to explore.

- Vinnie is scarred by it p. 4
- In the campfire pp. 15, 52, 83
- The car accident pp.18, 43,
- Erich's collection of firewood p. 30
- In medicine – the idea of cauterization pp. 36,55
- In the bushfire pp.175-8, 180
- As Dr Alexander says, *"I've told you before, Erich, sometimes burning is all you can do...a terrible but purifying force"* p.180

To put these ideas into context, read Dr Alexander's final letter to Erich p.331

The Birds

- Examine the function of the black cockatoos that appear regularly throughout the novel.
- Are they symbols of freedom, or do they carry a message?
- How significant is the baby bird that dies?

Check the following references:

pp. 72, 92,141, 159, 161, 167, 175, 179, 302, 335

For wider reading, conduct an investigation into the role of birds in other literature and film.

As a starting point, have a look at the ballad, *"The Twa Corbies"*, E.A. Poe's *"The Raven"* and Hitchcock's film *"The Birds"*. Barry Hines' *"Kes"*, and some of

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the poetry of Ted Hughes, such as *“Hawk Roosting”* and *“Thrushes”* will also make interesting reading.

Investigate the role of birds in Aboriginal Dreamtime Stories.

<http://www.yidaki.com.au/dreaming%20joy/Index%20dreaming.html> is a good place to start if you have access to the Internet.

Read the epigraph. How does this influence a reading of the novel?
See also *“The Past”* Oodgeroo of the tribe Noonuccal

Water

“Alice steps into the deluge. Unlike last time it is warm, blood like. She is instantly soaked, her nightdress clinging to her and the water cascading around the bulge of her belly...” p. 270

- Matilda is conceived at the end of Part 2 in a violent storm.
- She is born at the end of Part 3 in another storm.
- Alice’s life in Perth is highlighted by visits to the beach with Gunter and Francesca.
- How does this strong association with water enrich the text?

For wider reading, Tim Winton’s *A Minimum of Two* makes for an interesting comparison.

The Bush

“In surrounding trees the birds stirred and with the first rays of the sunlight the mist began to burn away and the kookaburras and magpies launched into strident greeting.

Their cry was answered by the unlikely sound of a bugle.” p.7

This rather incongruous opening to the second part of Chapter 1 is typical of the way in which Eaton uses the description of the bush to unify Erich and Vinnie’s experiences.

“Vinnie found himself filled with a sudden and overwhelming sense of being just another part of something – of somewhere.” p.25

The bush neutralizes differences and provides an environment where both Erich and Vinnie can be regenerated.

- Choose a descriptive passage from the novel and discuss Eaton’s technique.
- Use the passage as a model for some descriptive writing of your own.

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War

"You are thinking they are all the same as you, aren't you...you must look hard to find your true enemies, because chances are they will look just like you."
p.189

These words of Erich's father have driven Erich to enlist and have maintained him during his prison camp experiences. Yet when Hitler kills his father, Erich realizes,

"Everything he thought he'd believed, his father his country ... it was all a lie."
p.187

Only after his father's death is he able to accept Alice, and so there is a union of enemies.

This transformation is also reflected in the relationships between other characters, particularly between fathers and their children.

Each of these characters has suffered either the bitterness of war or the tragedy of loss, yet during the course of the novel they manage to transcend these difficulties.

Choose one or more of the following and document their changing relationships:

- Vinnie and his father
- Erich and his father
- Alice and her father
- Paul Alexander and Dr. Alexander
- Matilda and Erich
- Gunter and Alice's father

Families

Whilst tragedy is played out on world scale, similar rifts occur within families.

"Tell me about your family."

Erich looked sharply at Alice. 'Why?'

"I'm interested, that's all. I want to know if you're really all that different."

"Different?"

"From me. From the rest of us."

"Who is 'us'?"

"Australians." p.109

Vinnie

"Home was cold and lifeless now." p. 4

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At the beginning of the novel, Vinnie's feelings are clear.

"the house, his home, had been dead from the moment Katia drove the car off the road. His presence seemed only to remind his parents of what they had lost." p. 68

- What factors affected his changing feelings about them?
- Later Vinnie has the opportunity to read Alice's journal. How does this affect him?

Erich

- Compare and contrast this with Erich and his feelings for his family whilst he is in prison.
- Why has Erich found it so difficult to think about his family since he enlisted?
- What happens to enable him to deal with these feelings?
- How is he affected by the attempt on Hitler's life?
- How significant, apart from the personal loss is the death of Erich's father?
- Consider Erich's dreams in which his father appears as the enemy. What is the writer saying here?
- How does Mathilde's illness affect Erich?
- How does Erich react to the knowledge of the birth of his daughter?

Alice and Matilda

- What is the relationship between Alice and her parents?
- How does this change during her pregnancy?
- What does family mean to Matilda? - she has a father in Germany whom she has never seen.
- How did Paul's letters to her Grandfather affect Alice?

The last word on this theme probably belongs to Alice's friend, Anne:

"One day our kids are going to play together on those swings over there, and if I've got anything to do with it, then none of them, not yours or mine or anyone else's for that matter, is going to give a bugger about where their fathers came from." p.231

Multiculturalism

"She can feel the judgment in their gaze." p.243

Gunter and Francesca return to Australia to make a new life. In doing so they become allies of the now pregnant Alice.

- What does this tell the reader about Alice's place in society?
- How have attitudes to pregnancy and unmarried mothers changed since the end of the Second World War?

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- Alice's situation is not uncommon in Australia. How well do you think Australia, as a nation, handles multiculturalism?
- How does the writer position the reader in regard to this question? Consider his treatment of the guard Thomas, and the store assistant Michael.

Nationalism

"There is no room for Nazis here in Camp 16. If your loyalty is to Germany, that's fine."

- Does Erich understand the difference between being a Nazi and being a German?
- In small groups develop a definition of Nationalism.
- Present a report to the class on the relevance of Nationalism in the modern world.

Erich's father says, "Men should not place their personal feelings above their duty to their country."

- Do you agree? Or do you feel like Alice, that the only way to be human is not to do this?

Choices

There are at least three occasions when Erich makes important decisions:

- To enlist
- To steal the scalpel
- To stay in Germany with Mathilde

What factors influenced him in these decisions?

- Use the topic "Choices" as the stimulus for a piece of original writing. This could be entirely fictional or based upon your own experience. Choose a form that will enable you to demonstrate new writing skills, and give your piece an original title.

Punishment

"Perhaps this land too was being punished." p.6

"...he would be reminded each and every day of his cowardice..." p.5

"No weakness. Not here. Not in the enemy heartland" p.7

For both Erich and Vinnie, their isolation is self-imposed.

Much of their suffering is self-inflicted, despite the fact that both characters have been 'burned'.

- Chart the stages by which they deal with their punishments.

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Age

Erich, who is seventeen years old, claims to be twenty-two so he can fight in the war. What is Anthony Eaton's view of Erich's action?

History is full of examples of young men who have lied about their age to enlist, and fight for their country.

(See *Soldier Boy* – Tony Hill, Penguin Books)

Generally their patriotism has been applauded. However, in recent times many young men and women have sacrificed their lives as suicide bombers and freedom fighters.

- How are these people viewed?
- What factors affect our perceptions of these people?
- Research an area of conflict in the modern world and present a report to the class on the motivation of the combatants.

Biography

Interview members of your family as research into your family history. Find out about an interesting relative, perhaps someone who migrated to Australia, or someone who fought for their country.

Collect a photograph of this person and write a biographical piece about their life.

Recommended Reading

Generals Die in Bed – Charles Yale Harrison

Going Off – Colin Bowles

Jackson's Track – Carolyn Landon and Darryl Tonkin

Maybe Tomorrow – Boori Pryor and Meme McDonald

Nights in the Sun – Colin Bowles

Only the Heart - Brian Caswell, Phu an Chiem

Soldier Boy – Anthony Hill

Boys of Blood and Bone – David Metzenthen

The Shark Net – Robert Drewe

The Song of an Innocent Bystander – Ian Bone

When you Wake and find me Gone – Maureen McCarthy

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Eaton was a teacher of Drama and Literature before becoming a full-time writer. He has written a number of award winning books writing across age groups and in many different genres. His novels, *The Darkness*, and

Fireshadow were both awarded the Western Australian Premier's award for Young Adult Literature, the latter

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also named as a CBCA Honour Book. His most recent book is *Skyfall*, the second book of his *Darklands* speculative fiction trilogy, which was published in July, 2007. He is in the final stages of researching an historic adventure novel set in Antarctica for which he spent Christmas 2005 at Casey Station in Antarctica.

Anthony and his wife live in Canberra.