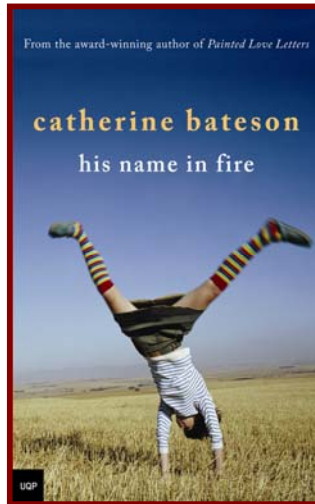


UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

HIS NAME IN FIRE

Catherine Bateson



Teachers' Notes

Written by Catherine Bateson

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SYNOPSIS

A linked collection of poetry reflecting the dreams, memories, aspirations, even fears of a disparate group of people living in a small country town suffering economic decline: businesses have moved, the main source of employment, the abattoir is not hiring.

Mollie is the binding force of the book, and its driving force is her arrival in town at the behest of the local Centrelink office *a work for the dole* project ...*the dole for a circus*. Supporting the circus is a group of musicians including Matthew and Emma. Every member of the circus has a story, as has society at large, and the microcosm of this small town can be seen as a metaphor for the world at large.

The narrative is shaped by letters from Mollie to her lover Seb, song lyrics by Matthew's father TJ for his band 'TJ and the Runners' and poems from each of the members of the circus who comment on their past, life now and each other. Like life, it is a mix that at times needs concentration to make connections. It is an involving process.

Bateson's decision to approach this story through poetry rather than prose raises a number of questions about the appropriateness of literary form to subject. Poetry allows subjects to be handled with a delicacy and emotional response that prose often cannot reach: feelings beyond words. For example, Emma's description of her father speaking to her mother on the phone:

*And his voice is a long, long, steady note
Played out by someone so sure of where it goes
They can breathe all the way through it.*

(Remember Emma and her mother, who lives apart from her husband and daughter, are both singers; hence the musical connotation as well as the sense of long distance reassurance.)

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Is the circus a good idea or a bad idea? Is the aim of such a project to teach people how to juggle, etc. or to provide other skills? What place has self-esteem and a sense of achievement in life skills?
- We are what our past has made of us. Circumstances beyond our control can rule our lives. Does this mean we haven't the capacity to change our future?
- The effects of mental problems on family. Read *No Worries* by Bill Condon to support your discussion.

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- Hope is a great gift. What gifts are implicit in *His Name in Fire*?
- The debilitating effects of unemployment.
- The power of friendship and love to see people through problems.
- The strength of community.
- The working through of grief.

Looked at as a whole *His Name in Fire* juggles many human needs and emotions. A rounding-up exercise could be an assessment on how well the author has kept all her balls in the air.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine Bateson's books have received much acclaim. Commendations for her books include:

Rain May and Captain Daniel

Winner CBCA Book of the Year Awards Younger Readers 2003

Winner Queensland Premier's Literary Awards Best Children's Book 2003

Shortlisted NSW Premier's Awards – Patricia Wrightson

Recommended Reading List for Australian Family Therapists Award for Children's Literature

Millie & the Night Herron

Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Notable Australian Book 2005

Painted Love Letters

Winner Australian Family Therapists Award for Children's Literature 2003

Honour Book CBCA Book of the Year Awards Older Readers 2003

Shortlisted NSW Premier's Literary Awards – Ethel Turner Prize 2003

The Year It All Happened

Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Notable Australian Book 2002

Catherine Bateson grew up in a second-hand bookshop in Brisbane frequented by leading Australian writers including Tom Shapcott and Bill Jones. This, she says, gave her 'the incredibly false view of the world that everybody reads and writes'. The daughter of a journalist mother and father who was for many years Editor of The Australian Journal, Catherine's passion for writing is a lifelong one.