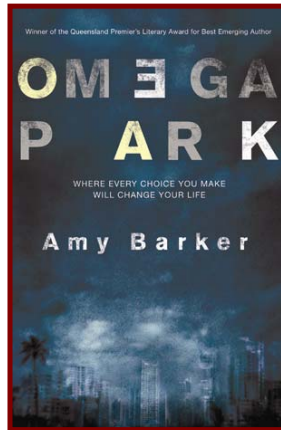


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OMEGA PARK

Amy Barker



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising secondary English teacher

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“Omega Park is one of those books that could be easily taught in schools to help kids develop an understanding and empathy for those not as advantaged as most.”

Elaine Henry, CEO of The Smith Family

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SYNOPSIS

Amy Barker's award-winning first novel, *Omega Park*, is a gritty story that tracks life in a council housing estate on the outskirts of the Gold Coast, Australia. The often forgotten plight of a nation's poor and uneducated is highlighted through the parallel, yet occasionally overlapping, lives of Jacob and Dingo who are both residents of Omega Park. The search for a meaningful place in society, a true sense of belonging, underpins the lives of the main characters. Consequently, this text is rich in social issues to discuss in a classroom context.

Jacob's life, from the beginning, is riddled with challenges such as drug addicted parents, petty crime and a general 'us versus them' mentality when compared to the mainstream of society. Even though he dreams of another life, it is very clear that Jacob has little hope of leaving Omega Park, the council estate, given the influence of his peers and supposed role models. His death in a high-speed car chase triggers a chain of events that draws attention to an underclass of people living in a developed nation that prides itself on equality.

Dingo, on the other hand, is a young impressionable boy who looks up to his neighbours in Omega Park, which can only ultimately end badly. Jacob's death affects him in many ways, as he tries to deal with his own emotions as well as dealing with the prejudice meted out by his schoolmates.

Omega Park challenges readers to reassess their understanding of the often unwanted segment of society. The cycle of poverty, along with stigma and crime provide poignant themes throughout the story, as people band together in a ghetto-like community of their own making. Riots, drug use, theft, violence and sexual abuse are daily occurrences in the estate – things which are generally unseen in mainstream society. Moreover, the fact that the 'Parkees' see this as normality is a basis for solid class discussion.

THEMES**Social Classes:**

- Omega Park is a housing estate created by the government to place the socially disadvantaged away from the Gold Coast city centres.
- Rioting by Omega Park residents, essentially a societal underclass, is a response to alleged discrimination by police.
- 'Parkees' are stigmatised by mainstream Gold Coast residents, consequently affecting their education and employment opportunities.
- Criminal activity is rife in Omega Park, as the youth who grow up with it see it as normality.

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Belonging:

- Many characters find it hard to separate their own beliefs from the general beliefs of many of the residents of Omega Park, which fosters a sense of belonging to the 'Parkee' community. Consequently, a ghetto mentality is created, which greatly impacts on the development of people living there.
- Peer pressure and the need to belong push Dingo to be involved in activities he would otherwise avoid.
- Both adults and children alike feel a sense of belonging to Omega Park, even though they know its poor reputation. This essentially creates a community, which grows in apparent isolation from mainstream society.
- Broken families are the norm in Omega Park, so the neighbourhood acts as a pseudo-family for the young who look for meaning, belonging and leadership.
- Pride within the Omega Park community is strong, despite the low standing in the rest of society.

Teenage Identities:

- Jacob and his Omega Park friends essentially face the same challenges as all teenagers, as well as the stigmatisation attached to the place they all live.
- Sexuality and personal identity is explored through many characters.

Relationships:

- The relationship between Jacob and his mother is very complicated. Responsibility and parenting issues are raised throughout Jacob's life.
- Peter John Smith's treatment of Jacob shows violence and emotional abuse.
- The friendship between the twins and Jacob highlights the tight bonds created within marginalised groups in society.
- The abusive relationship between Jacob's mother, Leo, and Peter John Smith illustrates the problems inherent in abusive sexual relationships.
- Dingo looks up to Jacob, even though he knows Jacob is involved in illegal activities.

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STUDY NOTES

- From the outset of the novel, it appears that the police are victimising people who live in Omega Park. What are your feelings about this? Is stronger scrutiny of the area a reasonable police policy?
- Respond to the statement: 'The youth of Omega Park found a sense of belonging amongst each other in reaction to the stigma placed on them by society's mainstream.' Do you agree or disagree? Provide evidence to justify your position.
- The entire novel is written in alternate chapters, following the life of Dingo or Jacob. Why do you think the author has done this? Is it effective?
- The rioting occurring in Omega Park is very similar to real riots that have occurred in Paris, and Sydney's Redfern. Many say that these riots have been caused by residents of these areas feeling undervalued and forgotten. Do you agree, or do you think they are behaving criminally without reason?
- Leo and Jacob have a very unconventional mother-son relationship in many ways. Do you think they love each other? Does Leo deserve to be a mother? What role should the government take in relationships like this?
- Create a table of information to compare the situations of Dingo and Jacob. From this, highlight the main differences and similarities of the two boys. What inferences can you make from this information?
- The bond between the twins, Gary and Ray, and Jacob is extremely strong. Do you think the marginalisation of 'Parkees' brings them together, making it harder for them to leave?
- When Jacob first arrived at Miami High School, he and his Omega Park neighbours attending the school were very negatively spoken to by the school principal. Why do you think the principal did this? Why do you think the 'Parkees' giggled?
- There are many references to Jacob developing an emotionless face in response to conflict. Was this out of a necessity for survival or because Jacob was inherently bad and enjoyed holding power over people?
- The reader is positioned to see the character Peter John Smith as the embodiment of evil. Do you think people like this actually exist? If so, do you think people are born that way or are they a product of their upbringing?

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- Alcohol and drug abuse permeate all aspects of the novel. Is this the cause of all the problems or a symptom of deeper issues?
- Boo is pregnant at 16 years old. What challenges will she experience because of this? Will she ever leave Omega Park?
- Twisted is seen as an outsider in Omega Park. Why is this?
- If Dingo did not have surfing as the foundation of his life and future, would he be more involved in the criminal activity in Omega Park?
- Dingo's friends from school ostracise him after Jacob's death because he lives in the Omega Park. How do you feel about this? Would this happen in your school?
- 'Numerous characters other than Dingo and Jacob illustrate different social issues stemming from disadvantage.' Formulate a response to this statement, using at least two characters as evidence to support your ideas.
- Research both the affirmative and negative sides for one of these debates:
 - Should police continue car chases?
 - Should the government place the socially disadvantaged in one area?
 - Should all rioters be prosecuted no matter what their social circumstance?
 - Should parents with known alcohol and drug problems be allowed to keep their children?
- Finally, after reading and discussing the novel, how do you feel about the people living in Omega Park? Do you feel more tolerant? Do you think they deserve harsher penalties? Do people brought up in this situation deserve leniency in society?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Barker was born on Queensland's Gold Coast in 1978. Amy holds degrees in English Literature and Creative Writing. *Omega Park* is her first novel and with it she won the 2008 Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Best Emerging Author. She lives in Brisbane.