

Teacher's Notes
In the Beech Forest
Compiled by Ross Watkins

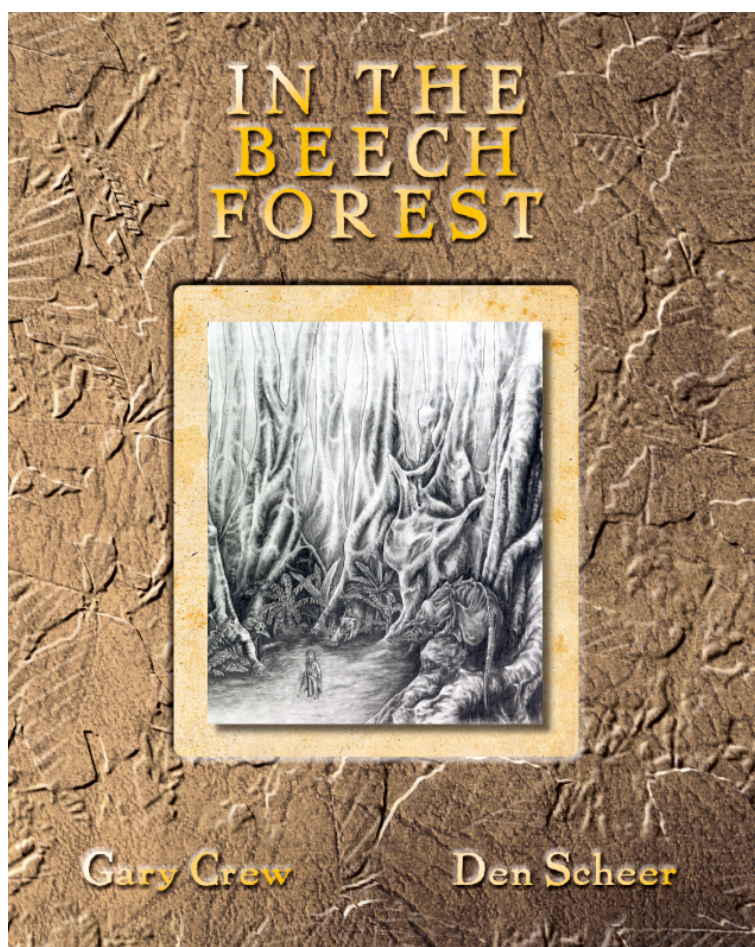
In the Beech Forest

by Gary Crew and illustrated by Den Scheer

Ford Street Publishing

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Recommended for ages 12-15



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SYNOPSIS

In the Beech Forest is a story from long ago, from now and from the future.

An ordinary boy takes a path leading him from the safety of his home into a dark forest. His head is full of the fearful images of his computer games that so excite, yet terrify him; battles between heroes and dreadful beasts that may haunt this primal landscape.

What will become of him on this journey? Will he survive? Will he defeat his fears? Will he emerge, still an ordinary boy?

Become his companion. Take the journey . . .

INTRODUCTION

In the Beech Forest is a deceptive story, at once a straightforward tale of a boy and his imagination, and yet a thematically resonant quest and rite-of-passage. Gary Crew is renowned for working with illustrators to produce sophisticated illustrated books where the visual text extends, complements or even conflicts with the written text. Such combinations of visual and verbal literacies create a rich and complex narrative which requires the reader to interpret its various levels of story to make meaning. *In the Beech Forest* is exemplary in this regard.

This book would appeal to both male and female readers from ages 12 to 15. While the ‘hero’ of Gary Crew’s written text is a boy (who emerges from the forest triumphant and altogether changed), Den Scheer’s contribution to the book ensures that young female readers will find identification with the ‘angel’ in battle with the Beech forest ‘monster’ (representative of fear generated by imagination). Indeed, aspiring female artists will also feel empowered by Den’s achievements as a young Australian illustrator.

Confronting emotion is at the thematic ‘heart’ of this story, something which all teenagers will be able to relate to, assisted by Crew’s accessible and suggestive written text and made visual by Scheer’s illustrations.

THEMES

In the Beech Forest could be studied in relation to numerous themes, many of which are interrelated. Suggested themes include:

- the role of imagination in generating fear

- confronting unknown places or spaces
- the influence of computer gaming on culture and society
- the use of books/literature/story to aid self knowledge and empowerment
- contemporary youth rites-of-passage

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

Explore the above themes by interrogating the written text in the following ways:

- Read the first page slowly and question why Gary Crew chose to begin his story with those words:
 - how is the boy introduced as the main character?
 - what setting is established, and how?
 - what conflict is introduced to the reader, forming the basis of the story?
 - why does the boy carry a ‘toy sword’ and what becomes of this sword? What might the sword symbolise?
 - what tone is established by phrases such as: ‘as withered leaves shifted, and grey shadows lengthened’?
 - discuss the active/passive connotations of the following words: ordinary, hero, gripped, quest, wild.
- Read the text on page 8 – why does the boy feel the need to ‘reassure himself’? What emotion underlies this page and how does Gary Crew suggest this?
- In relation to page 14, research the meanings of these words: primal, elementary, primordial. What do these meanings contribute to your understanding of the story?
- Research the following topics: Beech forest, Basalt runes, sacred places.
- The boy is described as ‘ordinary’ at the beginning of the book but by the end of the book he becomes ‘heroic’ – how is this change implied by the written text?

VISUAL LITERACY

Explore the above themes by interrogating the visual text in the following ways:

- The first image (page 5) presents the boy’s back to the reader – what effect is created by Den Scheer’s choice to introduce him to the reader without showing his face? When does the boy’s face first appear to the reader, and what is happening at this point in the story?
- Look closely at page 11. What unusual details do you notice (electricity power points, cables; the intimation of the boy looking through a monitor/screen) and how does this relate to the reference to computer gaming, imagination and fear?

- What could the ‘monster’ of the beech forest represent? What could the ‘angel’ of the beech forest represent? Read the visual text only from beginning to end and discuss the ‘battle’ it tells. What might this battle be representative of?
- Red is used from page 21 onwards – what connotations does the colour red suggest, both in general and specifically in relation to this story?
- Why is the boy standing on a heart on page 27? Discuss what a ‘heart’ is in terms of its literal and cultural meanings, then relate this back to the story.
- What is located at the ‘heart’ of ‘the earth’? What might this mean?
- In what way does the boy change from the beginning to end of the story, and how is this change symbolised by the visual representation of the boy?
- Discuss the illustration of the boy’s sword being overgrown by tree roots on page 32 – what different metaphorical meanings can be made of this and how does this illustration relate to the themes of the story?
- Observe the background texture used throughout the book – what effect does this create and what does it add to the story?
- Choices in typography affect the impression a reader receives from a book – what impression is given by this choice of typography?
- Gary Crew is renowned for working with illustrators to create sophisticated picture books where the written text and visual text tell two different stories. Discuss how these two different stories (written/visual) are unified by the reader.

CREATIVE RESPONSES

Explore personal responses to *In the Beech Forest* via the following creative activities:

- Select one illustration from the book and use this as the basis for writing your own short story about a character on a quest.
- Tell the story of the ‘monster’ and ‘angel’.
- Create your own visual text to accompany Gary Crew’s story by taking photos or finding images online.
- Write a poem about a place you once feared.
- Write a review of a computer game you have played or film you have watched, describing the emotions it made you feel and how this impacted on your reality.
- Write a review of a book which made you feel empowered.

ABOUT THE CREATORS

Dr Gary Crew is one of Australia’s most awarded authors for youth, winning the Australian Children’s Book of the Year award four times, twice for his novels, twice for his illustrated books. His previous book for Ford Street was *Finding Home*,

illustrated by Susie Boyer (teaching notes on *Finding Home* are available at www.fordstreetpublishing.com). Gary is Associate Professor in Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, and a State Ambassador for the 2012 National Year of Reading.

Den Scheer grew up on an isolated farm in Western Australia. There wasn't much in the way of TV or game consoles so she kept herself amused by reading, writing and drawing. At eighteen, she has won many awards for her illustrations, including the Young Australian Art Award (over three consecutive years) and the Australian Scholarship Group Art Award.

Dr Ross Watkins is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland. His Doctoral novel was shortlisted for the 2011 Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Emerging Author, and his first major publication, *The Boy Who Grew Into A Tree*, is an illustrated book written by Gary Crew. Ross' academic interests are primarily concerned with visual narrative and writing for the illustrated book.