

## My Private Pectus – Teacher’s Notes

*My Private Pectus* by Shane Thamm is a novel about boys becoming men. Jack ‘Sticks’ MacDermott is in Year 12 and has a few things on his mind. When his dad starts to coach the school rugby team, he begins to understand that the time has come for him to find his own path. The army is his father’s idea. Jack is thinking about becoming a mechanic. It is also time for Jack to find a girlfriend and Samantha Dean seems to be putting up her hand. It could all work out for Jack or fall in a great heap. As he stares at his sunken chest in the mirror, he knows that the time has come. But for what?

### Teaching

*My Private Pectus* is a novel that will work well as a class text or in a wide reading circle. It is very readable and features a small number of vivid characters that the students in the class will immediately recognise. All of the characters including Jack are three dimensional enough to divide opinion and create some discussion and debate. This is a brave book that tackles some difficult issues. Jack’s father is on a disability pension from the military. He is in a difficult situation as a single parent dealing with his own issues. At the same time, Jack is dealing with body image issues and trying to understand the nature of his relationship with Samantha, an unpopular girl at school. There is drug use in the novel but it is handled in a sensitive way that does not preach but lays bare the dangers. It is also a book about the way in which boys and men relate to each other. For teachers, this book is guaranteed to capture the interest of young readers. Boys may find it slightly close to the bone but they will certainly finish it. Girls who are curious about what is actually going on inside of their male classmates’ heads will devour this book. The opportunities for writing will be clear within a few pages. Shane Thamm’s deliberate use of ‘blokey’ language will be a good starting point for understanding the way that narrative is constructed. There are plenty of ideas here for analytical essays and creative responses.

This might be the book that gets a few of those boys back row reading!

### Before Reading

#### Class discussion

- Why is the title funny? What kind of a story will this be?
- What does the cover tell us about the book?

Activity: In small groups choose one of the following to research. Present your findings to the class.

- What is a ‘pectus’? What is a *pectus excavatum*?
- Shane Thamm, the writer. Has he written any other books? What else can you find out about him?
- What are the rules to rugby?
- Joining the military – when and how does a person join the army?
- Apprenticeships – what are they?

While reading  
Comprehension Questions

1. Who are Jack's friends at school?
2. Describe Jack's relationship with his father?
3. Where is Jack's mother?
4. What does Jack think of Roger Pask? Why?
5. Who is Ryan? Who is Mike?
6. What happens at the first training session?
7. What kind of person is Lisa?
8. How is Samantha introduced to the reader?
9. Does Jack want to join the army?
10. What happens at the rugby game against Cavendish Road State High School?
11. What is Jack's father's reaction to Jack's mistake in the game?
12. What does Sam accuse Jack of when he meets her after work? Is she right?
13. What kind of person is Mike?
14. What happens at the Pask house?
15. Why does Jack's dad hit The P?
16. How do Jack's feelings for Sam change? Why?
17. Why does Gez get angry at Jack?
18. Why does Jack decide that Sam isn't interested in him?
19. What happens at the party?
20. What does the doctor tell Jack and his father?
21. What happens at the garage? How does Jack get the apprenticeship?
22. How does the book end? How are the various elements resolved?

After reading

Make a character chart like the following:

| Character               | Description | Quote |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------|
| Jack 'Sticks' McDermott |             |       |
| Brian McDermott         |             |       |
| Gez                     |             |       |
| Cuppas                  |             |       |
| The P                   |             |       |
| Sam                     |             |       |

Other characters to include: Mike, Ryan, Lisa, Roger Pask, Mr Maloney

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you feel about Jack at the beginning of the book? How do you feel at the end?
2. Does your opinion of Cuppas change throughout the book?
3. Is Mike a good guy or a bad guy or something in between?
4. What do you think of Jack's father?

The story

## Discussion

All stories are built on problems or conflicts. What are the problems or conflicts in this story? How are they resolved?

## Activity

In small groups decide on five important turning points in the story.

## Ideas

The following ideas or issues are raised in the story. Find a quote to go along with each:

### Identity

### Friendship

### Appearances

### Decisions

### Gender

## Discussion Questions

### Identity

1. How do the various characters in the story define themselves? Consider Jack, his father, Gez, The P, Cuppas, Mike, and Roger Pask.
2. How does Jack's image of himself change in the course of the novel?
3. What point is the writer making about male identity?

### Friendship

1. Describe the friendship between Brian McDermott and Roger Pask.
2. Why is Gez Jack's best mate?
3. Is Mike Jack's friend?
4. What is the nature of male friendships in the novel?

### Appearances

1. What does Jack see when he looks in the mirror?
2. What is Jack's first impression of Sam?
3. Why is he uncomfortable speaking to her at school?
4. Why is Cuppas targeted by the other boys?
5. What does Jack think Sam has done at the party? Is he right?
6. What point is the writer making about appearances?

### Decisions

1. Why does Jack attack Cuppas in the locker room?
2. Why does Jack drive too fast in Gez's car?
3. How does Jack's father come to terms with Jack's ambition to be a mechanic?

4. How do the characters in the novel make decisions?

## Gender

1. How does the novel challenge male stereotypes?
2. What pressures are faced by the male characters?
3. How does the writer explore female stereotypes in the novel?
4. How do the male characters in the novel deal with problems?
5. The author says that he 'likes to give these boys a voice'. What does this mean? Why does he believe that boys need to be heard?

## Activities – General

### 1. Names and Nicknames

Australians are fond of nicknames. People are often known by variations on their given or family names. Sometimes they are given a name based on something they do or the way that they look. In small groups, make a list of common nicknames and discuss the following questions.

Why are these nicknames given to people?  
Who calls people by nicknames? Why?  
Why are nicknames a sign of affection?  
Are nicknames sometimes a problem? Why?  
Has anyone in the group ever had a nickname that they disliked? How did they feel when people addressed them with it?  
Is there a difference between men and women when it comes to nicknames?  
Why are Australians so fond of nicknames?

### 2. Sports Survey: Gender and Sport

In small groups create a survey to determine attitudes towards gender and sports in your year level. Think of questions that address some of the following issues:

Preference for team or individual sports  
Level of involvement  
Pressure from parents, peers  
Sports viewing habits.

Create statements that other students will either agree or disagree with on a scale. For example:

'Boys' sports are taken more seriously than girls'

|                |       |          |          |                   |
|----------------|-------|----------|----------|-------------------|
| 1              | 2     | 3        | 4        | 5                 |
| Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Sure | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

When you have finished the survey, collate, or record, the data and try to draw some conclusions. Present your findings to the class.

## Cars

Make a list of all of the cars mentioned in the book. Find pictures and information on each of the cars and create a poster for your classroom.

## Text Responses

### Creative:

1. Write about the Gez's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday party from the point of view of one of the other characters.
2. Write a letter from Jack's father to Jack's mother describing some of the events in the novel.
3. Write an alternative ending. Think of other ways that some of Jack's problems might have been resolved.
4. If you could change one thing about your body, what would it be? Why?
5. Write a letter to your parents explaining something about yourself that they don't seem to understand.

### Analytical:

1. To accept Samantha, Jack must first accept himself. Discuss.
2. Mike makes Jack uncomfortable because of his insistence on discussing his feelings. Do you agree?
3. Jack's father is trying to live his life through Jack. Discuss.
4. Jack resolves his conflicts by focussing on the things he can do, rather than those he can't. Discuss.
5. Shane Thamm takes a negative view of team sports in this novel. Do you agree?

### NOTES – Tony Thompson

Tony is a Melbourne based teacher and author. He has taught English to high school students in Japan, Brunei, Cambodia, and Carlton. He is currently teaching at Victoria University in Footscray. His articles have appeared in *The Age* and *The Australian* and he has appeared on Radio National's Lingua Franca program. Black Dog Books published his first book, *Shakespeare: The Most Famous Man in London* in 2009.