Teachers' Notes for *Changing Yesterday* by Sean McMullen

Story Summary

Set in Melbourne in 1901, the story follows the growth and development of a small group of teenagers who are acting to change history. The main character, Liore has travelled back through time to change events that led to the catastrophic 100 years war. The prequel, *Before the Storm* is the story of how the bombing of the new Australian Parliament was averted. *Changing Yesterday* explores the idea that changing history can have all kinds of ramifications, and Liore discovers that averting one disaster can have a domino effect that still leads to catastrophe.

The collection of characters used by McMullen brings together different genders, classes and maturities. The bulk of the story takes place during a chase – one of quite a different speed considering that the route is from Melbourne to London and the mode of travel is steamship. With plasma guns alongside Morse code and Victorian skirts alongside futuristic battle gear, this makes for a story of juxtapositions.

Studying a sequel:

Consider decisions that need to be made by the author when developing a sequel. The story must not be repetitive but must have enough information for a new reader to make sense of the plot and characters. It must stand alone effectively and yet be enjoyable to the reader who has completed the earlier book. Some questions to consider:

Does the author develop the characters enough, having already done so (for the most part) in the first book?

Is the reader who has read the first book, bored by repetition as the characters as they are re-introduced?

Pages 1 to 13 contain the 'Prologue' a device used to set the scene and give the basics of the first book.

Look closely at those 13 pages and consider the way the author has covered essential information about plot, character and setting.

There is a delicate balance when writing a sequel as the author must be true to original characters and build of previous plot complexities but at the same time, avoid writing the same story over a second time. Consider how the author manages this in *Changing Yesterday*.

How do the characters' sense of importance change from book to book?

Liore begins as one of the main characters but her fellow time-traveller, Fox, is merely mentioned but not included in the story at all. As the story progresses, the focus moves away from Liore and it is clear that this story is about Daniel and Barry. A new character, Madeleine is introduced and becomes a central part of the plot. In this way, Sean McMullen morphs the focus from the previous book to have a different perspective.

Speculative Fiction

Various bloggers and reviewers have described this book as being within the 'Speculative Fiction' collection of genres. It is a fascinating mix of historical fiction and science fiction. It is difficult to find a definition of speculative fiction except that most authorities agree that it

is an umbrella term that encompasses a number of genres all of which consider the 'What if ...' possibilities.

Historical fiction – The author has done a great deal of research about the life and times of 1901; a period about which, the author says, little is written. This is an interesting statement given that 1901 was the date of Federation, a significant era in Australian History. There is much in this book to explore in terms of historical accuracy.

The first parliament was held in the Exhibition Buildings in Melbourne. Who were the politicians involved and whom did they represent? Who officially opened this parliament? Was it a big enough event for the potential attention of terrorists? For many years Melbourne and Sydney would fight over the right to permanently house the Federal parliament.  In this story, the characters begin by travelling to Albury, considered the half way point and the border between the States, to change another event in history. Was this a deliberate choice by the author to focus attention on the 'New South Wales V Victoria' battle?

As one event is changed, so are the memories of Liore, which lead to the need to interfere once again in the natural order of things. Many science fiction writers consider the dangers of changes in time travel. Popular television hero Doctor Who frequently emphasises the need for no interference when in a different time. There is the danger of meeting yourself or making a change that leads to you not really ever having existed. Time travel throws up a huge opportunity for anomaly and time travel writers must consider how they plan to deal with this. The device chosen by McMullen is for the time travelling characters to 'lose substance' (p324) and as the story progresses, the reader almost forgets about them. Over the period of the book, Liore gradually fades from being a central character to hardly having a presence at all.

Book reviews

*Comparing reviews*
This book has been reviewed in a number of locations. Students can use search engines to find bloggers or reviewers who have published reviews. They can compare the reviews and look at the elements that are considered strengths or weaknesses by different reviewers and can create their own reviews.

*Writing reviews*
Reviews can be published by students in a number of safe locations. A good place to start is the 'Inside a Dog' site created for young people by the Centre for Youth Literature at the Victorian State Library.

Look at published reviews and identify the 'rules' of a review. Consider the number of words, the balance of summary and comment, the use of generalisations of choice of adjectives and the opening and closing sentences. Use these commonalities to assist creation of a review.

*Responding to reviews*
Reviewers often use generalisations about books that can create good opportunities for discussion about opinions and subjectivity. For example, Claire Saxby makes the following statement: "*Changing Yesterday* is a riot. It's high camp adventure and penny-dreadful pulp romance. It's egad-melodrama with high tech weapons."


Sue Burtsztynski states, "*Changing Yesterday*, like *Before The Storm*, is a deliciously entertaining romp with a steampunk flavour."

Discuss the extent to which you think these short statements are accurate.

Using Literature Circles

Using the Literature Circles model of studying a text can be a useful way for students to focus on a number of wide-ranging aspects. There is a wealth of support for establishing Lit Circles and the following are web sites that might be helpful.

**Literature Circles Resources**
http://abcteach.com/directory/basics/reading/literature_circles/

**Literature Circles Job Sheets**
http://www.scribd.com/doc/15506880/Literature-Circle-Job-Sheets

**Literature Circle Worksheets**
http://worksheetplace.com/index.php?function=DisplayCategory&showCategory=Y&links=2&id=51&link1=43&link2=51

This model of book club requires each group member to come to a discussion forum having looked specifically at one element of the text which they then share with the other readers. Each element is categorised as a 'role' within the group.

The following guide can be used by students to explore aspects of one of the Lit Circle roles.

- **Discussion Director** - *asks questions and leads discussion*
  This role requires the student to create and pose questions to prompt group discussion about the big ideas in the text. These should go beyond the literal, and look at character analysis, implied meaning, and deeper concepts. It is not an easy task to ask students to create such questions and considerable guidance may be necessary.

  Discussion questions that might be selected or adapted by the Discussion Director:
  How important is it that historical detail relating to the turn of the century is accurate?
  Does the prologue give sufficient information to effectively set the scene and therefore prove to be an effective device for beginning a sequel?
  The author likes to throw together characters who would be considered complete opposites. How likely is it that Daniel, a well-off school student, would have Barry the Bag, a petty thief, as a mate?
  How is the traditional idea of a 'chase' affected by the fact that is occurs on a slow moving steamer crossing the ocean?
  Barry works out that he will need a sample of Liore's DNA in order to activate the plasma gun. Is it a bit far-fetched to consider that he works his own way through this logic?
  Is Barry a 'goodie', a 'baddie' or something in between?

- **Literary Luminary** - *finds examples of good use of language*
  This role requires the reader to find quotes and text examples that show particularly effective or interesting use of language. This might include metaphor, description, technical language etc. Sharing with the group might mean identifying these excerpts and bringing them to the attention of others or it might involve the rehearsal a passage which is read with strong attention to presentation skills.

Look for examples of:
1. Dialogue that compares the language spoken by the lower and upper classes of the time.
2. Adjectives that describe settings that would be unusual for today's reader eg the family drawing room, first class lounge on the ship,
3. Technical descriptions of the futuristic elements of the story such as the 'macro-quantum devices' explanation on page 305

- **Vocabulary Extender** - *finds new vocabulary*
The role of this reader is to focus attention at the level of individual words. Definitions of any unfamiliar terms can be provided or simply the attention of the other group members can be drawn to specific words. This role can seem quite straightforward but has the potential to focus attention of the importance of language choices by good writers.

In *Changing Yesterday*, the vocabulary extender has the opportunity to focus on:
1. Words that are specific to the historical period eg steerage tickets
2. Words that define specific characters and their social standing eg a girl referred to as a 'baggage'.
3. Words that relate to the technical aspects of the story eg greasers lubricating joints.

- **Connector** - *makes connections with their own life experiences, other literature, other authors, movies, etc.*
The role of connector is to examine the concepts and central themes and events in the story and relate them to other contexts.

In *Changing Yesterday* the reader is in an interesting middle ground between the historical setting and the futuristic warrior character. This may make connections of a personal nature difficult but there are quite diverse characters that allow for clear contrast and comparison between personalities. How is Daniel like and different to the typical sixteen-year old of today? How is Madeline like the women of the time who fought for women's rights and gender equality? How is Barry alike or different from the petty criminals of today? How are relationships similar or different to how they would play out with today's teenagers. Daniel is quite open about his undying passion for Muriel and happily shares this with his family. Would this happen today? Consider the mock bedroom scene (p269) and the discomfort of the participants. How does this compare with similar 'set up' scenes in other texts?

- **Summariser** – *summarises the events from the section the group has read*
This role will require a thorough understanding of the events and characters of the text. It is not a retelling but a summation of key points and events. This is the role that usually begins the group discussion as the summariser brings everyone's thoughts to refocus on the part of the book that has been covered so far.

Chapter headings in this book are interestingly chosen to divide the story into labeled sections. A summariser might look at the heading as a guide for pulling out the vital elements that tell the story.
It can be helpful for the summariser to have a guide for ensuring key information is shared with the group. For each chapter consider:
1. Setting – where is the story taking place and what changes are central to the plot developments?

2. Focus character – which characters are central to this chapter and why has the author chosen to make this the focus?
3. Complication/resolution – what are the key problems that are raised, dealt with or overcome in this chapter?
4. Plot line – what is the climax that this chapter works towards?


- **Illustrator** – *creates pictures, diagrams or illustrations that reflect scenes, characters or ideas from the text.*
This role is usually a popular one and needs to be introduced carefully so that it does not just become a shallow 'draw a picture' task. The illustrator may need to conduct research to find out about details to be drawn or may need to identify key descriptive passages that they have used to create their illustrations of characters, objects or places. When done well, this role can generate considerable discussion about the various mental images that different readers bring to an un-illustrated text.

As the illustrator, the reader may:
1. Create a portrait of a main character using a description in the book in order to create a visual representation of that character for the group to consider. Discuss how different readers had similar or different images in their heads.
2. Create a 'still life' containing objects central to the story and share the reason for their inclusion.
3. Create a cartoon image with a caption depicting a humourous moment in the story, for example 'Barry the Bag discovers that Wellington isn't much of a guard dog'.
4. Create a sociogram depicting the relationships and links between each of the characters.
5. Create a picture using only colour and texture that represents a part of the story.


- **Predictor** – *makes predictions on what will happen next in the story based on what has been read.*
This role can be problematic as students who are caught up in a story may find it impossible to stop reading at a given point. This makes prediction difficult as some of the group may actually know what is going to happen next. Readers can share what they thought might have happened in comparison to the actual events of the story.

An alternative which is particularly appropriate for *Changing Yesterday* is to consider the speculative nature of the book and lead the group in discussions of 'what if ...' scenarios along the way of the reading.
What if Daniel had made it to France and found Muriel with Fox?
What if the Lionhearts had successfully captured the plasma gun?
What if Liore and Madeleine had been successful in catching up with the Andromeda at Adelaide?

- **Travel Coordinator** – *keeps track of character movements and maps the settings*
The reader who holds this role usually creates a map or diagram to show physical movement. This can be done as one map that is handed on as different group members take on the role and add new parts of the journey.

*Changing Yesterday* lends itself well to the notion of mapping as the story takes place in Melbourne with real places named before moving through Victoria, again with real locations named. The reader could locate these places on a city map and then of a country map to show the chase from Melbourne to Adelaide. The steamship route to

Europe is also given and this may also mapped on an atlas. The different characters can be represented by different colours as the chase plays our through the story.

- **Record Keeper** – *makes sure all members are up to date and contributing*
  This role is a management one and involves coordinating the rest of the lit circle. It is not so much about the book as ensuring that each member of the group is ready to contribute, keeping up to date with reading and is prepared to lead their part of the activity. This person also has the role of managing role changes and recording who is to do what for the next meeting.