

Dead Dog in the Still of the Night

Author Outline:

Archie's work includes novels, short stories, plays, feature stories, critical essays, reviews and advertising copy. He has been published internationally, is the recipient of the 2012 Premio Globo Tricolore, and most recently was awarded an International Fellowship for literature. In between writing Archie presents writing workshops and author talks all over Australia to audiences of very different ages and abilities.

Archie has worked as a secondary school teacher of English, and was nominated for the Victorian Teacher excellence Awards by his students, an accolade he views as a career highlight. Archie has written teacher notes for other author's titles, and has been lecturing to students and teachers for over a decade on both his own and other writers' work.

Dead Dog in the Still of the Night is Archie's seventh novel, and comes after the success of several key award winning novels, including Sparring with Shadows , and The Dons, along with the critically acclaimed Last of the Braves. And Bruises: Boys Don't Cry.

DEAD DOG IN THE STILL OF THE NIGHT...a summary.

Primo's life is about to take a sudden and unforeseen change of direction.

With only weeks to go in his final year of secondary school, Primo is confronted with the sudden return to the already fractured family home of one of his older brothers, Adrian. Married young and with an infant daughter, Adrian has been caught out having an illicit workplace affair and his wife has kicked him out of the marital home.

Accustomed to having things run pretty much his own way, Adrian is filled with a blinding desire to ruin this woman who has made their affair public. It is a desire which will drive Primo into an act of misguided interference which begins with a petulant decision to take his very ill father's treasured Fiat 500 out without permission . This decision results in the classic car being damaged, the cost of which is beyond Primo's meagre savings as a fulltime student and part time worker in a freight distribution company. The entire situation is made worse still when his eldest brother Santo-whose arrogance and vanity outstrips his actual abilities, announces he will reopen their father's mechanic's workshop-and set the Fiat up as a static feature to entice clients.

With his once adulterous and quick-tempered father now frail and ailing in a nursing home, finances stretched, and his own love life on the brink of collapse from his inability to commit fully, Primo faces the prospect of having to find money quickly and secretly to repair the Fiat before anyone in the family is wise to what he's done. In the process Primo sees a means to also find the funds he desperately needs to go on a Gap Year holiday with Maddie his girlfriend.

Turning to his best friend Tony Gargano-"Tone", who delivers pizza's for his father's business in the back of a 1970's Mercedes hearse, Primo proposes an audacious idea to con money from his desperate brother Adrian in return for helping him out of his predicament. Armed with the shadowy details about Tone's father's past-a past littered with colourful identities and shady business dealings, Primo embarks on what he assumes will be a simple act of bravado and intimidation against the furious

woman in return for a sum of money that Adrian is to provide no questions asked. The plan is to use Tone's father's perceived reputation as a would-be hard man and possible underworld affiliate, and drop a road kill dog on the doorstep of the woman as a veiled warning sign for her to desist from taking any further action against Adrian.

The plan goes awry when the woman in question turns out to be the sister of Ari, a brooding, confrontational and imposing work colleague from Primo's part time place of work. Ari has both the potential and the means to discover who might be behind the dead dog on the doorstep of the house he shares with his sister and her young children. And the likelihood of this cannot be allowed to come to fruition at any cost.

Primo means first in Italian. But Primo is first by name only. He is in fact the last born, behind the only girl, Kath, and possibly "an accident". In his mind Primo is the child born to try and repair the emotional vacuum left in his mother after his father's repeated extramarital affairs. In his father's eyes he is the child born to stop him finally enjoying the fruits of his many long years as a self-employed mechanic. Primo has much to prove, most of it to himself, and so this chance to stand up and be counted, to make a mark and have an older brother reliant on him, blinds Primo to the reality of what he is doing, and the dire consequences if the deed is uncovered-as it threatens to be.

While he contemplates life without his girlfriend Maddie if he fails to follow through on his promise to go to Europe with her at the end of his exams, the momentum of his ill conceived act of intimidation has Primo moving from one deceitful act to another.

Rather than clarify and quell the situation, Primo's actions intensify and magnify the simmering family tensions-and their wider implications of misplaced loyalties, compromised relationships and ultimately the questions of trust, forgiveness and redemption.

Dead Dog in the Still of the Night is a novel which explores the sometimes tumultuous and frequently fragile bonds between various family members, bonds forged on expectations of trust, loyalty, duty, and a degree of compromise and a readiness to forgive past indiscretions. It is a novel about self-worth and self-determination, and the need in all of us to find what we feel is our just and rightful place in our own families, but also in the wider society.

That Primo feels the need to prove himself worthy of stepping out of the shadows of his siblings failures and successes, and from under the crushing weight of his mother's stoic refusal to allow the man who betrayed her so blatantly to now live out his final days abandoned in a nursing home, means he will have to find a way through a mire of contradictory emotions if he is to find any redemption at all.

Archimede Fusillo.

TEACHER NOTES FOR **DEAD DOG IN THE STILL OF THE NIGHT.**

CHARACTERS:

Primo Nato: His name means 'First' in Italian, but Primo is actually the third son in a family of four siblings, is in Year 12 and has just got his licence. Life has become complicated in the wake of his father being put into a nursing home, his relationship with his girlfriend Maddie reaching a cross-roads, and his brother Adrian moving back into the family home after being evicted by his wife for having an affair. Having grown accustomed to being 'the man of the house', Primo's position is threatened by the shift in family dynamics the return of his older brother triggers, and he is faced with the need to reassert his authority, reassess his relationship with Maddie, and deal with the fallout of an impetuous act of callous

Tony "Tone" Gargano: Primo's best mate, Tone has dropped out of school to work at his father's pizza restaurant-with a view to taking over the business in due course. Tone is easy-going and yet troubled by his volatile relationship with his father, making him prone to masking his anger and self-doubt with behaviour that often appears superficial and questionable. Tone is loyal and reliable, yet uncertain about his own future despite there being a successful family business to walk into.

Primo's father: Life has been hard for this Southern Italian, who despite much early set-backs built up a successful mechanic's workshop, provided for his family and even managed to buy his precious Fiat 500 Bambino. In the twilight of his years the sudden on-set of dementia has taken him from his family and landed him in a nursing home, where he lives blissfully unaware of the emotional havoc he has brought upon his wife and children because of his years of adulterous behaviour.

Primo's mother: An Irish-Australian woman with a strong sense of family and duty, she is a determined and resilient individual with a powerful drive to protect her family-including the husband who repeatedly betrayed her. Emotionally scarred by the harsh realities of her married life, and now faced with having to manage the family without her husband, Mrs Nato is a resourceful, competent mother and wife whose apparent acceptance of her husband's behaviour disguises a much more vigorous and competent woman.

Adrian Nato: the second born son, married young to his pregnant girlfriend, Adrian replicates his father's failings by having an affair with a female co-worker. Disillusioned by his seemingly mundane life, Adrian's ill-conceived affair threatens more than his marriage because of his inability to take responsibility for any of his actions and too ready attitude to blame the woman concerned for the state of his post-affair life.

Santo Nato: The eldest son, Santo is convinced of his position as head of the family in the absence of his father. As the eldest son, and child, Santo believes he has a entitlement to make decisions which might involve the rest of the family without due recourse to their consent or consultation. A failure at several business ventures Santo nonetheless sees himself as a visionary and high-stakes player, even when those stakes involve the livelihood of his parents and siblings.

Katherine: As the only daughter, Katherine feels keenly her mother's sense of belittlement at her treatment by her husband. Unwilling to live a life bound to the expectations of her often controlling father, Katherine has moved out-and made a life for herself outside of the family troubles and struggles. And yet, she too can never be completely removed from, or immune to, the fallout from the family history-or more recently, her youngest brother's ill-conceived act of vengeance against a woman and her children.

Maddie: Two years older than Primo, Maddie has her heart set on travelling to Europe, a trip she had envisioned taking with her boyfriend now that he is about to complete Year 12 and she is well into her university studies. When Primo changes his mind Maddie's reaction is one of disbelief and disillusion. And this, coupled with a growing sense of having been duped, brings out the darker side of Maddie's personality, making her less willing to indulge Primo's apparent inability to commit to her, and makes her consider Primo's role in the dead dog saga as something more sinister than mere misguided loyalty toward a troubled brother.

Stella: Adrian's wife, and mother of two year old Bethany (Beth), Stella is a strong willed woman-with a hidden agenda. Frustrated by her husband's betrayal, Stella remains stoic and focused on the well-being of their daughter, and her own long-term survival.

Ari: Primo's leading-hand at the freight yard, Ari is a hulking, imposing figure whose drug dealings and suspicious nature make him a very threatening enemy to have. In his late twenties, Ari's world is one of implied and real violence, predicated by his underlying sense that others see him as less than completely trustworthy and capable outside of his role as overseer at the freight yard.

Crystal: Ari's sister, and Adrian's lover, she has her own demons to contend with, the largest of which is a mounting sense of self-loathing and disgust at her plight in light of Adrian's betrayal of both her and his wife, Stella.

THEMES:

The novel explores family relationships, looking at the often complex nature of shifting loyalties and rivalries between conflicting individuals faced with common threats to their identity as individuals, and as members of wider family networks.

One the one level there is Primo's immediate family, the Natos. They are a fractured group of people bound by blood, yet also under threat by same, particularly as Primo's father sinks deeper and deeper into his dementia and the poisonous consequences of his cheating on his family begin to take their toll. There are questions posed-and answered-for better or worse, about one's duty and sense of loyalty to one's immediate family. Primo's helping of his brother Adrian is both a call to duty, but also a response to personal need and opportunism in the face of personal challenges.

Loyalty: There are levels and degrees of loyalty at work throughout the novel. There is the loyalty implicit in being part of a family unit. There is the loyalty implicit in the relationships between husband and wife, between siblings, between friends and lovers. Each aspect of loyalty demands a conscious reckoning by the characters about what personal demands will be made of them in order

that they maintain the loyalty-to another, to a concept such as family, and what price they are prepared to pay in order to keep that loyalty viable.

Love: Some love is almost expected as a given—a mother for her child for instance. Other forms of love are dependent on conscious decisions about the degree to which one elects to be given over to another, and the level to which they allow themselves to be changed, by that other. When Primo's mother consciously decides not to abandon her wayward husband, is she merely demonstrating a kind of love that is actually a sense of loyalty to the construct of marriage, or is it love that can forgive? Is Primo's response to Maddie's going off to Europe without him a kind of love too? One that can let go?

Duty: Often confused with love. But are love and duty the same thing? Does Primo act out of a sense of duty as a brother when he sets out to defend Adrian against Ari, or is it out of love for his brother? Is it because of guilt?..Duty and obligation are probably closer than duty and love. There is an implicit sense that duty is about lack of choice, wherein love is about a conscious desire to do what is right for the other irrespective of the cost to oneself. Many of the characters in this novel seem to have a blurred understanding of the duty and love, and often perhaps act out of the impulse to be seen to be doing the right thing, rather than doing something because it is the right thing to do-for another and not just oneself.

Friendship: Many of the characters in the novel share close friendships, particularly Primo and Tone. Apart from a shared affinity for shared likes, friendships often place demands on those involved, demands that can either shore up the friendship, put it under pressure, or fracture it completely. Some friendships are better categorised as acquaintances, where the expectation of loyalty to another is an issue than might be expected in a friendship, and where there is less to lose emotionally if the relationship falters or fails. Primo and Tone's friendship is long-term and predicated on an expectation of reliability one for the other, and this may help explain why they enter into the act involving the dead dog so readily, for apart from being able to rely on each other, Primo and Tone appear to understand that the relationship also demands a high degree of trust, ie, that neither will betray the other.

Marriage: There are two marriages under direct scrutiny in the novel, that of Primo's parents, and that between Adrian and Stella. The former is battered by repeated betrayal, the latter threatened by the same. In the case of Primo's parents, his mother takes Primo's father back into the family home, and we have to ask whether it's for the sake of the children, some sense of commitment to the marriage despite all the hurt, or something apart which might involve Primo's mother's sense of duty-and perhaps loyalty, to the institution of marriage and her role in it. In Stella's case, it is the betrayal of the trust that should be implicit in marriage which seems to over-ride any concerns about loyalty or duty. And of course there is the question regarding the responsibility of each of the men to their actions and the consequences.

Identity: Each of the characters can be said to be searching for some concrete sense of who they are, where they belong, and why. Whether it is because of the position in the family—the irony for instance of being named Primo (1st) and yet actually being the last born, or the only daughter

amongst three sons (Katherine), or the only child-in the case of Tone, many of the characters struggle to get a firm sense of their identity.

The characters, from Primo to Maddie, all seek a better understanding of their place in the world they inhabit. The sexual awakening of Primo and Tone for instance, underlies their moving from teenage angst to young adult sensibility, particularly as Primo begins to appreciate his need to shift from focusing on his own interests and desires to those of Maddie and her needs and hopes.

Santo (saint in Italian), is probably anything but, given his history of failed relationships and shady business ventures, yet he is the eldest son in a family where the figurehead of the house is absent and suffering dementia. His struggles might be examined against his being caught between wanting to assert himself and the implied suggestions that he is somehow expected to take some of the reins of running the family alongside his mother.

Adrian is a married man unable to accept fully his responsibilities as a husband and father, focusing instead on his sense of having been denied opportunities to fully realise his potential-whatever that might be.

As an only child Tone is faced with the prospect of taking on his father's business, albeit not in the same manner his father might expect. Yet he is still only eighteen, working at a rather menial job for his father, and using bravado and bluster to mask some of the isolation he feels at being the sole focus of his parents' long-term ambitions. This is evident for instance when he worries about his father discovering what he and Primo have done with the dead dog and losing faith in his ability to run the business.

Relationships between characters, their responses to those they love and feel closest to, impact on how they see themselves. Primo's mother's apparent ready acquiescence to her husband's adultery needs close examination, for on the surface it may appear that she is merely capitulating to her perceived role as a wife, but could also have more to do with her personal sense of who she is as a woman committed to her family-which includes her husband.

That identity is multifaceted is apparent when any of the characters are looked at beyond their overt behaviours and some thought is given to the underlying beliefs and pressures. Even Ari, ostensibly raw and dangerous, has a softer side as evidenced by his taking in of his sister and her children. Even Stella, at first instance a caring, loving mother has a darker side when it is suggested she may have known all along what was to happen to Adrian-and yet seems to have gone along with it.

Family: Every family is different. And yet at the core of all families are certain key givens. One of them is a blood bond that often comes to the fore when least expected-but which can also act as a catalyst for some of the most fierce and ferocious responses to real or perceived threats. In the case of the Nato family, this blood bond both binds them together with regard to dealing with Primo's father's dementia and adulterous behaviour-yet also feeds the sense of betrayal and loathing, the sense of resentment at their plight-as individuals and as a group.

Another core given in families is the subtle commitment to loyalty and duty between the various members, a drive to protect those closest even when they may have let you down. Primo's response to Adrian being bashed is an instance. Primo's mother's continued care of the husband who betrayed her and their children, another. It is as though a sense of family and belonging to family is a

crucial platform that helps us understand much about ourselves and make sense of the world around us.

The Fiat 500 Bambino:

The car, a classic Italian vehicle, represents a tangible expression for Primo's father of his success against all odds to make a financially successful life for himself and his family in his adopted homeland of Australia. But it is also an extension of his ego, his inability to take full and complete responsibility for his actions against his wife in the first instance, and his children in the other. The Fiat is a symbol of both success and vanity, a sign that Primo's father sees himself as somehow above the petty concerns of faithfulness and integrity to those around him. Embodied in the car is the notion that a man can stand apart from his actions irrespective of the consequences-and yet, just as the Fiat is damaged and in need of repair from external forces, so too in need of help and repair are the members of the Nato family. Unlike the car however, the damage is far deeper than mere cosmetic attention.

The Hearse:

Tone's hearse may be seen to represent the darker, less self-deprecating side of Tone's personality, and also be symbolic of the nature of the death and rebirth of relationships throughout the novel: Primo and Tone's, Primo's and Maddie's, Primo and his parents, Primo and his siblings and so forth. That Primo and Tone get about in a hearse-albeit retired, implies a nod to the cycle of life and relationships, a constant death and rebirth, sometimes with unforeseen consequences. There is both a dark humour attached to delivering pizza's in a hearse, but also an unsettling sense of foreboding about what takes place between Primo, Tone and the dead dog-and all that that brings to light for each of the characters drawn into the shadow of the dead dog on the verandah.

The Dead Dog:

Where Primo's father seems to be in limbo between life and death, the dog is well and truly dead, yet it serves a purpose, brazenly bizarre as that might be-to scare off Crystal from taking her anger and resentment against Adrian any further. The dog is both a symbol of death and also a powerful messenger of hope, obliging Primo to finally tackle his fears head on, and bring to a head a confrontation with the forces of denial, guilt and regret impeding the various members of his family from moving forward. As a token gesture of violence the dead dog is a potent symbol of the power of suggestion, and also a talisman for rallying good out of evil, wherein the sight of a dead dog on a stranger's doorstep becomes the common reference point for the characters to engage with each other in ways previously thought too difficult.

General Essay Questions:

1...Primo's main mistake is in not considering the consequences of his decision to leave the dead dog on Crystal's doorstep, not in actually leaving the dog there. Discuss.

2...In repeatedly taking her husband back, Primo's mother sets a bad example for her children, and this is particularly true of Adrian. Discuss.

3...Family's have their own rules. Outsiders can never fully understand how any one family operates. How true or otherwise is this?

4...The Fiat 500 is more than a classic car. It is a symbol of both success and failure. How might this apply to the Nato family's situation?

5...Friendships demand loyalty, but duty is optional. Is this possible? Discuss with relation to the various different friendships in the novel.

6...Every character in the novel suffers to varying degrees from a lack of insight into the plight of those around them. How true is this?

7...The women in the novel differ in their willingness to absolve those they care for of their shortcomings, but all seem capable of great empathy. Do you agree?

8...The difference between duty and loyalty is one of degree rather than substance. Is this a fair statement? Discuss with reference to the main characters in the novel and their relationship with those closest to them.

9...Without empathy all relationships are doomed to failure. It is empathy rather than love allows many relationships from failing completely. (Look particularly at the relationship between Primo's parents.)

10...Who we believe ourselves to be depends in large part on how we see ourselves reflected in others. Can this be at the core of explaining both the behaviour and the attitudes of the key characters in the novel?

11...Discuss the psychological role the Fiat 500 and the hearse play in the novel-and in particular discuss how they impact on the lives of those directly associated with them.

12...The dead dog is an obstacle that impacts on how Primo sees himself and what he might be able to achieve. In what ways does the dead dog also impact on Tone, particularly in light of how he sees his future plans?

13...Primo's father can be excused his past because of his present condition. Do you agree? If so, why? If not, why not?

14...Self-image is just one aspect of identity. What other factors might influence one's identity? Discuss with reference to at least three characters from the novel.

15...It is more important to find redemption rather than seek forgiveness. One is about another's view of you, the other about how you see yourself. Is this a fair statement to make when looking at the various actions of the characters in the novel?

A deeper appreciation.

Key questions for each Chapter:

Chapter 1.

In what ways does Primo and Tone's attitude toward each other reflect a depth or otherwise of understanding between them about what is important in each of their lives?

Chapter 2.

Primo visits his father out of a sense of duty to his mother. Is this reason enough for him to spend time with his ailing father?

Chapter 3.

Primo is to solely to blame for how Maddie reacts, and for what happens to Bambino. To what degree is this true?

Chapter 4.

'I promise to stick around for a long time.' Adrian says this to Primo on his return to the family home. In what ways might this have been taken as a threat by Primo from his older brother?

Chapter 5.

'My old man's a pain in the arse, Tone...But I can't sell the car out from under him.' What does this comment reveal about Primo, and his relationship with his father in particular?

Chapter 6.

What does the episode in the car tell us about the family dynamics in the Nato family, and what does it reveal about each of the characters?

Chapter 7.

What do we learn about Primo and Tone's relationship from their interaction regarding the dead dog in the back of the hearse?

Chapter 8.

Explain Primo's hesitation about leaving the dead dog on the doorstep once he realises there may be children in the house.

Chapter 9.

'Not "the house" Adrian...Your home. Yours and Stella's.' Why is this a telling comment from Primo's mother to her adulterous son? What does it reveal about her, and why?

Chapter 10.

Primo blames himself solely about the dead dog on the doorstep even though Tone willingly helped him carry it out. Is this view justified? Look too at his reaction to discovering who Ari is.

Chapter 11.

Adrian blackmails Primo over the dead dog on the doorstep, but he doesn't know about Ari. Explain the irony at play here.

Chapter 12.

'Some things can't be taken back, Maddie.' Primo says this to Maddie when he takes her to his father's workshop. Explain how this comment is about much more than just the dead dog on Crystal's doorstep.

Chapter 13.

What does the following comment about who should have Bambino reveal about Primo's mother's real state of mind and attitude toward her life and all she's endured?

'Why not mine, Primo? After all that I've put up with. After all the turning the other cheek that I've done, why isn't it mine?'

Chapter 14.

Explore and explain the dynamics between the two Nato women-and how this differs to that between the Nato men, and between the men and women in the Nato family. In what ways are the relationships indicative-and perhaps help explain the various problems each character faces?

Chapter 15.

Why is it Primo can't seem to do what Tone suggests he do and 'let sleeping dogs lie'? What, if anything, does this resistance to simply move past the episode with the dead dog tell us about Primo's personality and how he may be developing as an individual?

Chapter 16.

Primo and Maddie talk about 'trust', and seem to imply that it is important to both of them. Can a relationship succeed without trust? Provide evidence from the broader context of the novel.

Chapter 17.

Adrian deserves what he got. It is fair payback for his father's repeated infidelities. It was simply the universe returning to status quo as far as the turmoil in the Nato family is concerned. Do you agree with this sentiment? Why, or why not? Discuss in detail.

Chapter 18.

Examine the significance of the Nato siblings all being under the same roof for the first time in many years in light of where we are in the narrative at this stage of the novel.

Chapter 19.

Confronting Ari only confirms what we know about Primo. He has not managed to learn much of significance from all that has happened to him and his family. Is this a fair assessment of Primo's character? Discuss.

Chapter 20.

Look at this chapter in the context of the Cherokee quote that appears at the start of the novel.

Extention work:

1...Look at the history of Italian migration to Australia, and in particular at the prejudices and struggles encountered. Use this to develop a broader profile of both Primo's father and Tone's father-particularly in light of the reputation both men seem to have acquired.

2...Cars are often associated with certain personality types. Do some research into the possible links between the two key cars in this novel and how they might reflect both the people associated with them-and the stories behind them.

3...Read one or more other Australian novels which have Italians as core characters (Sparring with Shadows....Looking for Alibrandi, for instance), and compare both how such characters are presented to the reader, and examine the manner in which the authors use the cultural heritage of these characters to tell a particularly Australian story.

4...As the population ages, Nursing Homes are becoming increasingly significant in the lives of people dealing with elderly members of their family. Visit such a facility and talk with both the residents and the staff, and develop a profile of the type of people who reside there, their backgrounds, and the impact being in a home has had on theirs and their family's lives.

5...Primo's action regarding the dead dog is influenced by the movie The Godfather. Look at the influence movies in general may have on young people and how they behave, how they view the world, and how they in turn see themselves. (Broaden this to look also at the impact of You Tube and Snap Chat for instance.)

6...Draw up a chart that traces both Primo and Tone's attitudinal shift in terms of how they see their friendship and their individual role in it through the course of the novel.

7...Design a questionnaire aimed at young people which looks at attitudes to the sorts of challenges Primo, Tone and Maddie face in the novel. (Family break up, Romance, School, Post school career and personal choices, Loyalty to family and friends, and so forth.)

8...Prepare a collage of photos that best express for you the main challenges faced by ONE of the key characters in the novel. Do not use any written text. Find photos that evoke the meaning most powerfully. You might even think about preparing the collage as a Powerpoint that shows a change over time in how the character has coped or otherwise with the challenges.

9...Imagine making a movie of this novel. You are the Director and Screenwriter, decide which KEY events you MUST include-and justify your choices to a Producer-the person who has to find the finance for the project.

Decide too whether you would CHANGE anything in the story-and why.

Select Actors you think would best be suited to each of the key roles: Primo...Tone..Primo's parents...Adrian...Santo...Kathleen...Maddie...Ari...Crystal....Write a brief 'Why I believe you are suitable' letter to each of those actors.

Select ONE key scene and WRITE it up as a Shooting Script. (You might even like to scout Locations.)