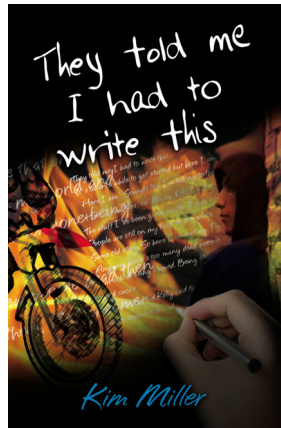


Teacher's Notes They Told Me I Had To Write This

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Recommended for age 13+

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THE OUTLINE

Clem is a boy in strife. Blamed for the death of his mother, carrying a terrible secret from Grade 5 and in trouble with the police, he's now in a school for toxic teenagers. And that rev-head school counselor wants him to write letters.

Through his writing Clem goes deep into the trauma that has defined his life. Then he comes face to face with his mother's death.

In a rush of bush bike racing, the death of one student and the consequent arrest of another, an unexpected first girlfriend, and some surprising friendships, Clem's story is the celebration of a boy who finds an unexpected future.

TEACHING

They Told Me I Had To Write This is a terrific starting point for student writing. Teachers may want to consider using it as the central text of a VCE English style 'Context' unit. The unit could be something along the lines of 'Challenges' or 'Coping'. It could also be broadened into 'Identity' or 'Family'. It is worth recalling that a book sometimes considered the prototype for contemporary teen fiction, *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, has a similar starting point. Ponyboy Curtis' story is written as an English assignment while he recovers his health. Other books that may work well in conjunction with *They Told Me I had to Write This* include Haddon's *A Curious Incident in the Nighttime*, *Go Ask Alice* and John Marsden's *So Much To Tell You*. An even more distant ancestor of this novel is *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. is also

But *They Told Me I Had To Write This* is also a great read in itself and a novel worthy of study and discussion. It raises a range of issues that will be of interest to students and a number of different characters who are guaranteed to divide opinion and provoke debate. The story is told in an imaginative manner, giving teachers plenty of scope to discuss point of view and subjectivity in narrative. Like all good stories, it has its secrets, its humorous moments, and a satisfying ending. *They Told Me I Had To Write This* is a book that students will pick up and finish.

KEY POINTS

- Challenges society's view of disadvantaged youth
- Tackles multiple issues affecting today's kids: bullying; family dysfunction; grief; mental illness; friendship
- Fast-paced plot
- Adults who are looking for insight into how to approach instances of deep teenage trauma will also find something here
- Many adults will simply enjoy a good story well told.

They Told Me I Had To Write This will appeal to boys in particular, but there is certainly enough to hold the interest of female readers too. Those who read it will learn a lot about real, gritty life. The story moves along nicely and the style in which it is written is different, authentic – and funny. The author has enabled us to see what motivates a troubled teenager and his problems are presented in a clever manner as he mainly tells his story through letters to his dead grandmother. In this way we can see how Clem thinks, what is happening to him and how he gradually learns to understand himself, through attending a school that handles boys with problems. His relationship with his father and how he has caused trouble to involve his father; and his relationship with others – his whole background has moulded him, and we see Clem's gradual progress and understand what has caused him to be the way he is.

This novel brings up myriad interesting issues but unfolds in a very credible and interesting manner.

And what a good place Rocky Valley School is! What good strategies and philosophy they practice – and it works!

They Told Me I Had to write This is a very good and engaging story.

The character of Clem is well developed and very credible and the reader certainly is involved in his story. The writer's style is original and clever in that Clem can impart so much of what is going on in his head as he writes his emotions and feelings to his grandmother – whose death is one of the issues he has to deal with. He can open up with his private thoughts to her. He chooses to do so as she was the only person, up until now, that he reckoned cared about him.

The issues raised in this story are of great interest and the resolutions presented are arrived at in a most credible fashion.

The humour in the story adds a little comic relief to some very thought-provoking material.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

Comprehension Questions

- In what tense is this story told?
- Who tells the story?
- Who is the Rev?
- What does Clem think about his father?
- Why has Clem been placed in a special school?
- Explain the Rev's role in helping Clem
- Why does Clem dislike the Rev's bike? (2)
- Name one reason Clem hates his dad (23)
- What does the school look like? (33)
- How did Mr Sykes' tent catch fire? (49)
- What's Clem's nickname? (61)
- What's Clem's girlfriend's name? (66)
- One of Clem's schoolmates dies. Who is it? (107)
- How did Clem's friend die? (109)
- Why did Clem's father blame him for his grandmother's death? (xx)
- Clem has a fight with Nick. What causes the fight? (137)
- Clem makes peace with Nick in Mr O'Neill's office. How? (150)
- What happens in the Values for Life class? 174)
- Clem gets a bike for his birthday. What else? (195/196)
- What is the greatest gift that Clem's father gives him? (196).

Find instances throughout the book that show

- kindness
- sympathy
- empathy
- being there for someone – altruism

- Love.

OPENING

- What does Clem tell us about his predicament?
- Why does Clem stay out of Bundy's way?
- What is the link between the beginning and the Rev's bike and the ending?

VOCABULARY

While reading this book you can increase your vocabulary by noting words that are unfamiliar to you. Some of these words are made up and not found in the dictionary, but their placement tells you exactly what they mean (context).

- ◆ Write your own sentence to show the meaning of the following words or phrases:
seriously megatastic (16), agro-biotic (34), cleverarity (35), terminal velocity (75), gravity (75), laidback (76), skittering (80), continual (83), adrenalin (87), stupidivity (103), overdose (109), apologelato (192)

CHARACTERS

Clem

Explain the following and find a quote from the book to support your idea:

- the way Clem views his new predicament
- how Clem copes with being with boys just as confused
- how Clem's classmates view him
- how Clem views himself.
- ◆ Write in three sentences explaining why Clem has behavioural problems. Find a place in the book where Clem is totally confused and angry.
 - Write a case study of Clem that shows his background, appearance, attitude, likes and dislikes, how he views himself against his peers, why he writes to his grandmother and how he views others. Set it up in the following manner:
 - Name:
 - Appearance:
 - Likes:
 - Dislikes:
 - Etc, etc.
 - ◆ Find places in the novel that indicate that Clem:
 - does things to provoke a reaction
 - is considerate and kind
 - cares what others think of him
 - has anger
 - is confused.

Other Characters

- Describe the Rev's role
- Describe Mr O'Neill's role
- Describe Bundy's character. What does he look like? (3)
- Write three sentences on why Hamish was important to the story
- Describe some of Mr Sykes' traits.

Activity

Create a 'Cast of Characters' page that could go at the beginning of the book. Give the name of the character and brief description.

Clem – a boy in strife

Rev

Bundy

Mr Sykes

etc

STYLE

- ◆ Look at the way in which Kim Miller tells the story and comment on the language the author uses.

TITLE

- ◆ Is this a good title for the book? Discuss this in terms of why Clem was asked to write letters to his gram.

COVER AND DESIGN

- ◆ Look at the cover of *They Told Me I Had To Write This* by Kim Miller and make some observations about it. What does the cover tell the potential reader? Is it representative of the book itself?
 - Examine the design and layout of the book and the different fonts used. What is the purpose of the different designs?

SPEAKING

- ◆ Clem is angry at a great many things.
 - Read out to the class a portion that shows this
 - At what point does Clem realise things are looking up? Give reasons for your choice
 - Act out a case conference with Clem, Nick and Mr O'Neill showing how Nick and Clem act toward one another and how their issue is resolved
 - Write a review of this book to be delivered to your classmates in a short speech.
- ◆ Talk about the following subjects using this novel as a basis for your thoughts:
 - family
 - trust
 - friends
 - remedying behavioural problems
 - guilt

- attitude
- obsession
- lying
- caring
- confusion
- desire
- masculinity
- blame
- hope
- support.

◆ Discuss in groups:

- What does Clem fear most?
- What set Clem off in the first place?
- How does Clem escape his reality?
- The system's mechanisms for dealing with people like Clem. Do they work?
- What you learnt from this novel.

Clem constantly misspells one word, 'coz'. The author uses this quite deliberately. It's one of those pesky metaphors that Clem struggles with. The word, 'because', tells us why something happened. But Clem misinterprets things so often that it becomes obvious he doesn't understand the 'because' of his own life. For example, on pages three & four Clem sees the police car at school and takes off, thinking they are after him. And on pages eight to ten we see him blame the police for his own act of violence against Brian. It would be foolish to say he punched out Brian because there was a police car there when he arrived at school, but that is what he does.

Find two more instances of where Clem misunderstands the cause and effect of some part of his life. Tell us the event, Clem's bad 'coz' interpretation, and the real 'because' of it all.

ISSUES

The following issues can be discussed using this novel as a starting point:

- Behavioural problems in the young
- Student/professional relationships. How do counsellors help?
- Depression
- Anger
- Rejection
- Death
- Paedophilia
- Have a class discussion about ideal families as opposed to dysfunctional families. Create a 'perfect' family. Do any of the above issues have a place in this family? If so, discuss. Ask students to each name a member of their family that might fit into an imaginary dysfunctional family. Ensure they are aware they can create a fictional person – some might not want to share real experiences.

THE CRAFT OF WRITING

- ◆ What is the purpose of writing in first person? Could the author have used third person? What would have been the result if he had?

BLACKLINE MASTERS

Assignment 1

TROUBLE-MAKERS

Every school has them, but Rocky Valley is full of them. Despite being exactly like the others, Clem is cautious at first. Loudmouths are a distraction from study.

Task:

Think of a particular student who annoys you at school. Without using names, write about a particular incident in detail using dialogue that demonstrates how they rile you.

Now consider the following questions:

- How would you react to them differently if you were at Rocky Valley as opposed to how you cope at your own school?
- How would your reaction be different?
- What would you say to them at Rocky Valley?

Students have forty-five minutes to write their response.

ASSESSMENT	EXCELLENT	GOOD	AVERAGE	POOR
IMAGINATION				
DIALOGUE				
DESCRIPTION				
GRAMMAR				

Assignment 2

TEACHER'S PET – OR NOT!

You have just started at your new school, Rocky Valley. You thought you were a rebel, but you have nothing on these kids. What a pack of losers. But the teachers seem pretty cool – for a change they listen to you! But it's easy to make enemies. And the last thing you want these kids doing is calling you a teacher's pet. It's a fine balance to be listened to and yet seem aloof.

Task

Imagine you are at Rocky Valley. In a group, concoct a plan to get one over the teacher. It can't be too nasty, but one to show the teacher that he or she is not in total control. No way can they quell the rebel in you! An example is on page 101-102.

ASSESSMENT	EXCELLENT	GOOD	AVERAGE	POOR
TEAM WORK				
ORIGINALITY				
REALISTIC				
PRESENTATION				

Assignment 3

THE BULLY IN YOU

Bullying in both school and the workplace are major problems facing both adolescents and adults. Intimidation can be displayed in both physical and mental terms. The idea of this exercise is to experience both of these aspects.

Task

In small groups:

1. Choose a scene from *They Told Me I Had To Write This* involving both physical and mental abuse and write a script for the scene.
2. Choose roles and rehearse the scene.
3. Perform your scene for the rest of the class.

ASSESSMENT	EXCELLENT	GOOD	AVERAGE	POOR
SCRIPT WRITING				
DRAMA				
COMPREHENSION				
TEAM WORK				

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kim Miller grew up freewheeling the backstreets of country NSW but now lives on coastal Lake Macquarie. First studying engineering, he holds a PhD blending theology and Jungian psychology. Kim was a prison chaplain for many years and now works with men coming out of prison. Visit Clem's site at:
<http://users.tpg.com.au/kkmiller/Clem/> -or- www.kimmiller.id.au/clem

NOTES: Paul Collins