



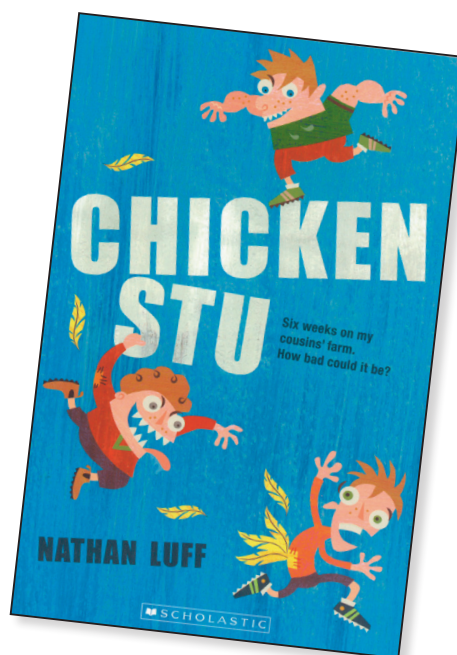
CHICKEN STU by Nathan Luff

This novel for readers aged 9+ is a classic city-kid-moves-to-the-country story, but there are some surprising twists. It is both funny and unexpectedly touching.

SYNOPSIS

Stu is a city kid. He lives in a hip inner-city suburb of Sydney and spends most of his time indoors, reading voraciously. He uses a Ventolin puffer to deal with his asthma, and he has a regular appointment with Dr Graham, the psychologist. At the start of the long summer vacation, his mother announces that she is going to spend the next six weeks in Italy. She needs to get away and it's a perfect opportunity to practise her Italian and have some fun with a group of friends. Stu has been teaching himself Italian from books, so he is excited by the news - but unfortunately his mother has other plans. She has arranged for him to spend the vacation with her brother and his family on their farm three hours south of Sydney instead.

Clearly, Stu and his mother have problems - mostly stemming, it emerges gradually, from the death of his father. Almost until the end of the novel, Stu keeps a lid on his grief - mostly by using his intellect and his talent for humour. Despite his witty storytelling, farm life offers him more than enough reasons for the general unhappiness he is feeling. His Aunt Gwen, Uncle Col and their sons James and Matt are yobbos. Aunt Gwen in particular is loud and pushy: she hides Stu's books and insists that he get outside and play. Playing with her boys, however, means becoming their victim and he is forced to live out his nickname, 'Chicken Stu'. His cousins try to frighten



him with stories about the ghost of the Jolly Swagman. They trick him, almost drown him, tie him up, steal his puffer, imprison him and beat him up. Finally, alone in an abandoned mine, Stu confronts the reality of his father's death and the prospect of a lonely future.

That may be the low point in his feelings, but it is a significant turning point that gives him the courage to find his way back home, and to find a way of reconciling himself with his troubled past and the family that, until now, he has been reluctant to own.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

With his four brothers, the author Nathan Luff grew up on a farm near Yass in rural NSW. After his university studies, Nathan graduated in Screenwriting from the Australian Film, Television and Radio School and has written for newspapers, theatre and television. In 2007 he was nominated for an Australian Writers' Guild Award (AWGIE) for a youth/community theatre project titled

Book Club Teaching Notes

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'Smashed'. The same year he received 2nd prize in the Grenfell Henry Lawson Short Story Competition and was commended in the Children's Book Council (NSW Branch) Frustrated Writer's Mentorship Program for what was to become *Chicken Stu*. This is his first novel.

Nathan has lived in Italy, where he learnt to speak Italian badly, and he says he can't swim. So the scenes in *Chicken Stu* where Stu and his mother have learnt to speak Italian in their different ways and the scenes where Stu and his cousins almost drown in the flooded creek are clearly inspired by real life experiences - although other scenes, such as Stu's conversation with a hammer, are just as clearly the work of the author's imagination!

NATHAN LUFF SAYS

'The first draft of *Chicken Stu* (which at the time was titled "Why the Chicken Crossed the Creek") was based more on my own childhood than the final version. But I was always worrying, "What will my family think of this bit?" So, in subsequent drafts, the brothers turned into cousins and were cut from four down to two, and I changed the names of everyone, which has proven to be a cunning disguise!

'I loved writing the bits with Aunt Gwen in them. She was such a fun character - everything she does to Stu, she does out of love; she just has a funny way of showing it.

'The hardest part, though, was knowing how to end the book. Each new draft had a different ending, including: death-defying raft rides down the flooded creek; a game of chicken over an unstable bridge; a plot to create an army of killer sheep; and there was even an ending where everything that took place was just part of an elaborate game. The Jolly Swagman was always a part of the story, in varying forms, but once I realised he was integral to Stu's emotional journey, everything slotted into place.

'The environment of the farm was very much a driving factor and early on I asked myself, "How do kids, filled to the brim with imagination, transform such a stark environment?" "When is a shed not a shed?" When it's a castle - that type of thing. It was about game-playing.

'But the book ended up being about grief, or possibly more about avoidance - how does a kid come to terms with the death of a parent? Stu's avoidance of the issue (with his lists, his books, the adventure he becomes part of) is not sustainable and eventually leads him into the mine/cave where he allows himself to properly grieve for the first time. But he constantly avoids many things (he avoids his relatives by reading all the time, he avoids doing anything new) so it is also about embracing the now.'



SCHOLASTIC



POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Ask students whether they have ever moved from the country to the city or from the city to the country. Ask them what differences they noticed. How did the move make them feel?
2. Ask students which books they have read and which movies or TV shows they have seen in which someone moves from the city to the country.
3. Show students the front cover of *Chicken Stu*. Why do they think it is 'Stu', not 'Stew'? Read the back cover blurb. What kind of book are they expecting?
4. Read aloud to the end of the first paragraph on p.3. Ask students, 'What have you learnt about Stu? What do you think will happen next?'
5. Ask students to read to the end of p.25. Ask them to brainstorm and list on the board the images or detailed descriptions that Stu uses to convey his dislike of Aunt Gwen, Uncle Col and their boys. (eg p.15 a fly darts up Aunt Gwen's nose; p.17 his cousins' snot-flicking competition.)
6. On p.55 Stu says he feels like a cardboard cut-out. Why?
7. How do Aunt Gwen, James and Matt try to force Stu to fit in with farm life? (eg she hides his books p.51; the boys take his puffer p.97)
8. Why is the Jolly Swagman important in the story?
9. On Stu's journey, he is challenged by both nature and his cousins. Ask students to make a list of the obstacles he must overcome.
10. Why do you think Stu keeps making lists?
11. Brainstorm and make a list of the old-fashioned colloquial expressions that Stu encounters when he moves to the country. (eg. pp.28-31, p.40)
12. Several of the characters in *Chicken Stu* are drama queens, using exaggeration as the basis of comedy. Find five examples.
13. Discuss the role of imagination in *Chicken Stu*. Ask students to find an example of the way it frightens one of the characters, and an example of the way it can make the characters laugh.
14. Ask students what people mean when they refer to 'the other side'. What is the 'other side' in *Chicken Stu*?
15. On p.143, why does Stu hurl MC Hammer at James?
16. Why doesn't Stu feel powerful on p.145, even though he is 'king of the other side - King Chicken.'
17. At the end of *Chicken Stu*, do you feel optimistic about Stu's future? Why?