



Dexter: The Courageous Koala

By Jesse Blackadder

Book Summary:

Ashley can't wait to bring home the puppy she's been promised — but then Dad loses his job, and her parents can't afford an extra mouth to feed. Heartbroken, Ashley reluctantly goes off to spend the school holidays with an aunt she barely knows — eccentric Micky, who lives in an isolated spot on the north coast of New South Wales and cares for injured koalas. Within hours of arriving, the road into Micky's property is cut off by rising flood waters, then a wild storm brings a blackout and some serious damage to Micky's house and garden. Worse still, trees from a nearby koala colony have come down in the storm, and Ashley must risk life and limb to save an injured koala and her joey.

Written in a dual narrative from Ashley's and the joey's points of view, *Dexter: The Courageous Koala* is an exciting, fast-paced story that is also cleverly structured and written with great compassion and insight into its characters — two- and four-legged alike. Unsentimental, factually accurate, dramatic and thoroughly engaging, *Dexter: The Courageous Koala* will appeal to a wide range of readers — even those who might not usually find themselves drawn to animal stories.

Curriculum Areas and Key Learning Outcomes:

Dexter: The Courageous Koala is suitable for readers from Year 5 up, although mature, capable readers in Years 3 and 4 will also find much to enjoy.

ACELT1609, ACELT1795, ACELT1610, ACELY1698, ACELY1701, ACELY1703, ACELY1704, ACELT1613, ACELT1800, ACELY1710, ACSSU043, ACSSU094, ACHCK027, ACHGK030, ACHGK028

Appropriate Ages:
8-13

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Notes by Judith Ridge

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Introduction

Dexter: The Courageous Koala provides opportunities for students to explore their personal, social, cultural and literary repertoires: 'ways of categorising aspects of prior knowledge and experiences that support readers in responding to the meaning of the text. Probing repertoire focuses on aligning readers with characters' personal, social and cultural experiences and on foregrounding readers' knowledge of how literary texts work.' (Iser, 1978, cited in McDonald, 2013, pp. 47–48, Chapter 4)

A full appreciation of the novel also encourages a consideration of the context in which it was written and read. The Australian curriculum defines context as 'the general social, historical and cultural conditions in which a text is responded to and created'. (Australian Curriculum: English, p. 129)

These teacher's notes will provide discussion points and activities across a range of KLAs, primarily but not exclusively English, and will address its social context (family, personal responsibility, shared community values), historical context (impact of extreme climate on native animals and the environment, our human response to such events) and cultural context (animal stories, Aboriginal influence on our relationship with the land and story, Australian cultural references).

About the Author

Jesse Blackadder is an award-winning author for children and adults. She lives on the far north coast of New South Wales — the same area that *Dexter: The Courageous Koala* is set — where she shares a large garden with a variety of wildlife, including passing koalas. Dexter's story was inspired by a previous koala resident of Jesse's garden, called Elsie, who unfortunately died of chlamydia, a disease affecting many koalas across Australia (including the fictional Dexter's mother). *Dexter: The Courageous Koala* is the third animal adventure story for children that Jesse has published with HarperCollinsPublishers. The previous titles are *Stay: The Last Dog in Antarctica* (based on the true story of a Guide Dog charity box that was smuggled to Antarctica) and *Paruku: The Desert Brumby* (inspired by the true story of desert brumbies from the Kimberley). Teacher's notes for these other titles are available on the HarperCollins website.

Author Inspiration

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Jesse Blackadder describes the inspiration for *Dexter: The Courageous Koala* in her author note at the back of the book, including details of the research she undertook to ensure Dexter's story was factually accurate.

Study notes on themes and curriculum areas

Note: Some of the discussion points raised in these teacher's notes are covered in the Primary Ethics curriculum.

<http://www.primaryethics.com.au/k-6curriculum.html>

Family

Family relationships are at the heart of much of the novel. Ashley comes from a small, loving family — she is an only child — that faces an enormous challenge when her father unexpectedly loses his job. Ashley's mother is a nurse, and takes on extra shifts, but the family is facing the real prospect of losing their home. Ashley disappoints her parents when she is more concerned about the fact that she will no longer be able to buy the puppy she has her heart set on than the crisis facing the family.

Because of the family's changed circumstances, Ashley's parents send her to stay for the school holidays with her mother's half-sister, Micky, who Ashley barely knows. Micky is an unconventional woman who lives in an isolated part of the far north coast of New South Wales, where her property is frequently cut off from road access by flood waters. Micky cares for injured koalas. She doesn't treat Ashley as a beloved niece visiting for a vacation, but with her brusque and unsentimental nature, she sets Ashley to work on her property and koala sanctuary.

Paralleled with Ashley's family is the parent–child unit of the joey (who Ashley will eventually come to call Dexter) and his mother, and the larger koala colony they belong to. Dexter's mother is protective and loving, but also keen to encourage her son to become more independent, in part because he is now old enough to begin to separate from his mother, but also because of her illness — she is becoming increasingly blind from conjunctivitis as a result of being infected with chlamydia.

Several key scenes contrast the human and animal families: Ashley's anger with her parents and lack of empathy for their difficult circumstances is contrasted with scenes of the koalas preparing to deal with the impending storm/cyclone. Later, when the storm hits, we see the koalas in a struggle for their lives as Ashley must take on responsibility beyond her years and experience when her aunt's house is damaged by the same cyclone.

Discussion points:

What makes a family? Some families have a mum and dad; some have step-parents and step- and half-siblings. Some are single-parent families; some families have two mums or two dads. Other families are formed as foster or adoptive families, when children need to be cared for by people who are not their blood relatives. Some people claim their friends are their family, while others include their pets as part of the family.

Koalas live in colonies, but while they are territorial, they are also solitary, unless it's mating season. The only social relationships koalas have are that of mother and joey.

Talk about the different kinds of families people — and animals — belong to. Be sensitive to the fact that some children may not wish to discuss the makeup of their own family, but encourage a wide-ranging discussion of the different kinds of families people might belong to.

A debate topic — such as 'Pets are not family members' — may come from the discussion.

Pet ownership: Discussion points and research

When Ashley first arrives at her aunt Micky's home, she is still angry and upset about not being able to bring home Puppy, the Spoodle pup she had been expecting would be hers, and is angry and resentful at being sent away for the school holidays. As such, she is not particularly interested in the koalas Micky cares for, or in koalas generally. 'What does it *do*, actually?' she asks her aunt, on first seeing the recuperating koala her aunt is caring for. 'She's not a pet. She's a wild animal,' Micky responds. (Chapter 7, pp. 52–53)

Ashley at this stage is still only thinking of animals in terms of her own relationship with them. Although she has not even met Puppy — she has only seen his photo on the breeder's website — she has developed an entire relationship with him, based on her hopes and dreams of what it will be like to have her very first pet. Part of Ashley's journey in the novel is to come to understand that animals — especially wild animals, but also domestic animals — have their own needs and are not solely defined in terms of their relationships to humans. At the same time, she learns to better understand and even become close to the apparently hard-hearted Micky, who is, on the surface of things, entirely pragmatic about the likelihood of the koalas in her care surviving ('Anyway, that joey probably won't make it. Look at him.' p. 136). Micky reveals her heartbreak at losing four joeys she was hand-raising, and is later upset at the death of Jemima, the koala who prompted Ashley to ask 'what does it do?' when she first saw her. Hard lessons are learnt about the realities of

wildlife care and conservation — despite the best efforts of carers, animals do not always survive, and those who care for them must tread the line between compassion and pragmatism. This is later reflected in Ashley's acceptance of her friend Emma deciding to keep Puppy (renamed Billie) for herself, and Ashley's adoption of a rescue dog, Scrap, of whom the narrative notes, 'It was as if he and Ashley had been made for one another.' (p. 187) Finally, Ashley understands that 'You have to give ... animals the sort of love that they understood, and be willing to say goodbye to them. She had the feeling she was going to be good at it.' (p. 187)

Open the conversation on **pet ownership** by having a general discussion about a time the students were disappointed. Perhaps there was a movie or concert they weren't allowed to go to, or a party they had to miss because of a family engagement. Or it may have been, like Ashley in *Dexter: The Courageous Koala*, when they missed out on having a pet they desperately wanted. How do they cope with disappointment? Do they sulk, or take it on the chin? Do they throw a tantrum, or try to bargain their way into getting what they want? Have they ever lied to try to get their way?

If a story specifically about not getting a pet is not volunteered, steer the conversation to discuss Ashley's plight at the start of the novel when she is no longer able to have the puppy she had her heart set on (this information is provided on the back cover, so having prior knowledge of this event should not spoil the students' engagement with the book). This conversation can then lead into a discussion about the rights and responsibilities of pet ownership:

What pets do students own? Who is responsible for caring for them? What are the different needs different kinds of pets have? E.g. dogs need to be exercised; birds need their cages or aviaries cleaned; fish need their tanks kept clean. Did students promise to look after a pet only to leave all the care to their parents? What does it mean to give animals the 'right sort of love'? Come back to this question after students have finished reading the book, and check if their attitudes towards their rights and responsibilities as pet owners have changed.

Has anyone ever cared for an injured or orphaned animal, native or otherwise? E.g. a family cat or dog may have an injury or wound that requires them to wear an 'Elizabethan collar' or to be confined to a crate while they recover from a broken bone. Some students may have hand-raised fledglings fallen from nests, or cared for a stray cat or dog who has turned up in their yard with a litter. What was the experience like? Some students may have sad stories about pets they have lost to injury or accident, so be prepared for sensitive or sorrowful stories and experiences.

This story details a Sydney family who cared for a baby magpie, named Penguin, who while remaining a wild bird free to come and go, has also bonded permanently with the family:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-11/penguin-the-magpie-finds-home-with-bloom-family/6292106>

Penguin has her own Instagram account with nearly 20,000 followers:

<https://instagram.com/penguinthemagpie/>

A licence is required to own reptiles and certain allowable native animals. In pairs, have students do some research on ownership of native animals. What native animals and reptiles can people have as pets? What regulations are in place governing responsible ownership and care for native animals? Good places to start are each state's Department of Environment or equivalent. Have students report back on their findings and discuss why such laws are in place and whether or not they think they are a good idea.

Some books and stories about care for and ownership of native animals as pets are listed below. Some of these stories are about Aboriginal children and their native pets. If possible, an Aboriginal Education Officer or local Elder should be invited to speak to the students about Aboriginal people's relationship with native animals. Some older books may be found in libraries.

Baker, Ivy, *The Dingo Summer*, Angus and Robertson (1980)

Bernard, Patricia, *Kangaroo Kids*, Transworld Publishers (1989)

D'Ath, Justin, *Mission Fox* series, Penguin

Doust, Jon and Spillman, Ken, *Magpie Mischief*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press (2002)

French, Jackie, *Dancing with Ben Hall and Other Yarns*, HarperCollins (1997)

French, Jackie, *Nanberry: Black Brother White*, HarperCollins (2011)

French, Jackie and Whatley, Bruce, *Diary of a Wombat*, HarperCollins (2002)

Gilbert, Kevin, *Me and Mary Kangaroo*, Penguin (1994)

Honey, Elizabeth, *Remote Man*, Allen and Unwin (2000)

Lowe, Pat and Pike, Jimmy, *Desert Dog*, Magabala Books (1998)

Pryor, Boori Monty and McDonald, Meme, *My Girragundji*, Allen and Unwin (1998)

(book rap on *My Girragundji* here:

<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/raps/mygirragundji/bookrap3.htm>)

Thiele, Colin, *Storm Boy*, New Holland Publishers (2006) (originally published 1964; many of Thiele's books are about children's relationships with wild animals and may make an excellent companion study to *Dexter: The Courageous Koala*)

Various authors/illustrators, *Solo Bush Babies* series, Omnibus Books (Scholastic Australia)

Wheeler, Samantha, *Smooch and Rose*, UQP (2013)

Wildlife conservation: Discussion points, research and activities

Invite a representative from WIRES or another wildlife conservation group to speak to students about the work they do.

In small groups, research the animals that were native to your local area. Are there any native colonies still known to live in the area? What are some of the natural and human threats to the survival of wild animal colonies?

Are there any nature reserves in your local area? Who is responsible for them — local government, state government, not-for-profit/charity organisations or businesses? If possible, visit a local wildlife sanctuary, or invite a National Parks and Wildlife Officer to speak to your students. If a visit is not possible, students may, in groups, prepare a multi-media presentation of wildlife parks and sanctuaries around Australia.

Examples include:

Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary, Gold Coast, Queensland
(the vet hospital attached features in *Dexter: The Courageous Koala*)

<http://www.cws.org.au/>

David Fleay Wildlife Park, Gold Coast, Queensland

<http://www.nprsr.qld.gov.au/parks/david-fleay/>

Blackbutt Reserve, Newcastle, New South Wales

http://www.newcastle.nsw.gov.au/recreation/blackbutt_reserve

Featherdale Wildlife Park, Doonside, New South Wales

<http://www.featherdale.com.au/>

Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, Australian Capital Territory

<http://www.tidbinbilla.act.gov.au/>

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Ballarat Wildlife Park, Victoria
<http://www.wildlifepark.com.au/>

Healesville Sanctuary, Victoria
<http://www.zoo.org.au/healesville>

Moonlit Sanctuary, Mornington Peninsula, Victoria
<http://www.moonlitsanctuary.com.au/>

Bonorong Wildlife Sanctuary, Brighton, Tasmania
<http://bonorong.com.au/>

Trowunna Wildlife Park, Mole Creek, Tasmania
<http://trowunna.com.au/>

Cleland Wild Park, Crafers, South Australia
<http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/clelandwildlife/Home>

Gorge Wildlife Park, South Australia
<http://gorgewildlifepark.com.au/>

Caversham Wildlife Park, Perth, Western Australia
<http://www.cavershamwildlife.com.au/>

Alice Springs Desert Park, Northern Territory
<http://www.ozanimals.com/travel/alice-springs-desert-park-red-centre-northern-territory>

Territory Wild Park, Darwin, Northern Territory
<http://www.territorywildlifepark.com.au/>

There are also numerous dedicated koala parks across Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria.

Activity

Create a class map of your suburb, local government area or wider regional area and identify sites where animal colonies exist now and in the past. You might also identify on the map any sites of potential threat to native animal colonies, such as new housing developments, roads projects and industrial sites. Investigate if there are any environmental impact studies on any such new developments, or if local companies have environmental protection policies in place.

Survey

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Conduct a wildlife survey of your local area. Each student can keep a wildlife diary, identifying reptiles, birds and any other native animals they may see in their yard and neighbourhoods. The class may also conduct a survey of native animals, reptiles and birds in the school grounds. A visual display for the school foyer or library may be created from student photographs with a chart documenting the students' observations. The survey can be conducted over the course of 1–2 weeks during the class study of *Dexter: The Courageous Koala*.

Koalas: Discussion points and research

Conduct a Grand Conversation — what do your students know, or think they know, about koalas? Ask some open questions about food, habitat and mating habits. Are koalas social or solitary animals? Do koalas play? Can a koala be a pet? Then in pairs or small groups, assign research topics based on the conversation for students to confirm or contradict what they know about koalas. Report back to the class and compile a wall chart of Koala Facts and Fantasies (e.g. koalas are not bears, and eucalyptus leaves do not make them drunk). The chart should include information about koala colonies and territorial ranges — you might like to include maps of known colonies from around Australia, with details of population sizes and conservation strategies.

After the students have read the novel, add new koala facts they learnt from the book. Some of this may require new research, e.g. Ashley learns that the 'leaf' she collects for injured koalas must not touch the ground, but why this is the case is never explained; on page 51, Dexter is described as seeing the red of his mother's blood. Can koalas see colour?

Truth and honesty

Ashley lies or is dishonest several times in the novel. First of all, despite knowing why she can't have the much longed-for Puppy, she goes behind her parents' backs to scheme with her best friend Emma for Emma to adopt Puppy and keep him until Ashley's father finds a new job and they can afford to bring Puppy home.

Later, at her aunt Micky's house, Ashley sneaks a look at her phone, even though she's been told she is not allowed to have it while she's staying with Micky.

In the biggest lie of all, Ashley tells fellow koala rescuers that her aunt has agreed to take in the orphaned koala cub she has named Dexter, even though her aunt has categorically said she refuses to care for any more joeys.

Discussion point:

Are any of Ashley's lies and deceptions justifiable? Is there any such thing as a 'good lie'? Under what circumstances have you lied, or would you lie? If the lie is to help someone else (e.g. an animal or friend in need) is that better than a lie to help yourself? Is it ever OK to lie? Who in our lives helps us make decisions about these kinds of questions — our family? Teachers? Friends? People from church or community organisations we belong to? Who else contributes to our beliefs about what is right and wrong?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ENGLISH

Dexter: The Courageous Koala is a surprisingly sophisticated example of the 'animal story' genre. Structurally, the novel develops and contrasts the human and animal experiences of its characters, drawing lines of similarity and difference between the animal and human characters and families, through action, setting, dialogue and characterisation. It provides many opportunities for analysing the author's use of language, particularly in the way she expresses the point of view of her non-human characters, but also including subject-related 'jargon' and acronyms, the use of figurative language to create scenes of great emotion and suspense, and the tension between the connotation/denotation of particular words. Begin by exploring the novel's social, cultural and historical contexts:

Social context

'Reading for social context in literary texts draws attention to the daily lives of the characters and their power and status in relation to each other, their families, communities and country.' McDonald, p. 43

The first question has been completed as a sample.

| Questions | Response | Quoted evidence |
|--|--|-----------------|
| 1 What kinds of communities do the main characters participate in? What values do these communities have? What influence do they hold? | Ashley participates in several communities: her immediate family, her friendship with Emma, with her aunt Micky and the other koala rescue people, and with the koalas she rescues. Ashley | |

and Emma influence each other to deceive Ashley's parents. The adults and Dexter all influence Ashley to reconsider her values around honesty, compassion and responsibility.

Ashley's parents value selflessness and cooperation.

Emma and Ashley share a love of animals and a desire to care for their own puppy.

'Go to your room until you can think of someone other than yourself.' p. 12

'We have to pull together as a family and pull through this.' p. 23

Ashley comes to share the values of wildlife conservation

with her aunt Micky and the other carers. Micky also values honesty highly.

'How could they even stay best friends? Ashley couldn't bear it. She'd have to visit Emma's house and see Bella growing up, knowing that her own puppy would have been the same size and learning the same things.' p. 14

Dexter, also known as Youngster, participates in a small community with his mother, although they are part of a larger koala colony.

'As she reached the door, she felt a rush of determination. She was going to do everything possible to help Dexter survive.' p. 91

The main values the koalas display are around protection and survival.

'Micky glared at her. "Not good enough, kid. I need you to stick by what you say. Hand it over."' p. 148

Dexter's mother is very influential, teaching Dexter the skills he will need to survive.

Chapter 1, pp. 5–8, the mother koala starts to teach Youngster (Dexter) to be independent. 'You did it. Next time will be easier.'

- 2 Who has status/power through wealth, skill or knowledge within these situations and how are they portrayed?
- Ashley's parents
 - Emma's parents
 - Aunt Micky
 - The vet at the Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary Hospital
- 3 How many major male and female characters are portrayed? Is there an even balance? Are their behaviours and feelings stereotypical or not?
- 4 How are younger and older generations portrayed? Who has power and status? Does this change?
- 5 Who benefits from these portrayals?
- Adults benefit by being shown as in control of children.
 - Men benefit by being portrayed as compassionate professionals (the vet).

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Women benefit by being portrayed as courageous and determined.

- 6 What sort of social knowledge is needed to understand this text?
- 7 What values, attitudes and beliefs about these social contexts does the text invite the reader to consider?

Questions and table adapted from McDonald, pp. 43–44

Cultural context

‘Reading for cultural context means reading for what counts as “normal” for the group and what customs, values and language are practised and shared. Culture is evident in the way of life represented in the literary text: when the culture presented is “outside” that of the reader, then cultural markers are easy to discern; when readers are members “inside” the culture, the way of life is taken for granted and cultural markers are transparent.’ McDonald, p. 39

| Questions | Response | Quoted evidence |
|--|--|-----------------|
| 1 What cultures does <i>Dexter: The Courageous Koala</i> portray? Is it part of your experience, knowledge or history? | The characters all appear to be Anglo-Australians. Magda’s name indicates she may have European heritage but this is not mentioned. No specific reference is made to Aboriginal Australia, but | |

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What sort of cultural knowledge is needed to fully appreciate the text?

the name places of the koala colony are reminiscent of Aboriginal place names.

Readers may be familiar with the Australian settings (suburban and bush/coast) and share a cultural value of the importance of protecting native species, especially one as emblematic of Australia as the koala.

'Drop bears' are an example of Australian humour and mythology. Micky uses the term in a different way than it was originally used. Do readers know the origins of 'drop bears'? Does it matter when reading the book? Are practical jokes (which drop bears are an example of) specific to particular cultures?

See bibliography for some drop bear links.

2 What cultural items from the past or present are included and why might they be included? What do

Aunt Micky's Argo van. (Note reference to the ship from Greek mythology — another cultural reference

- they mean? How are they used? readers may or may not know.)
- 3 What values, attitudes or beliefs about culture does the text invite the reader to consider?
 - 4 Are there any negative representations of culture? Why might the text include them?
 - 5 Who benefits from these portrayals?

Questions and table adapted from McDonald, p. 40

Historical context

‘Historical context specifically recognises the way the time period, prior events and the attitudes of the given time are embedded in texts. It recognises that historical context encompasses the places, culture and objects inherited from the past and these validate and reflect us as individuals, as family members and citizens.’
McDonald, p. 35

| Questions | Response | Quoted evidence |
|---|----------|-----------------|
| 1 If the time period is ‘now’, what are the historical influences on the lives of the characters? | | |

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- 2 Whose histories and experiences are included or omitted?
- 3 Who benefits from these portrayals?
- 4 Is this context part of the reader's experience, knowledge or personal history?

Questions and table adapted from McDonald, p. 37

Animal stories

Animal stories are one of the staples of children's literature. Classics such as *The Wind in the Willows* or the *Redwall* fantasy series feature anthropomorphised animals — animals that dress in human clothing, and speak and behave as humans do. Others, Colin Thiele's many novels featuring children's relationships with animals, or junior series fiction such as Wendy Orr's *Rainbow Street Pets*, treat the animals as animals, although they may also depict human-like communication and emotions. Writers like Michael Morpurgo write about animals in real historical contexts, such as his bestselling novel *War Horse*. Animals sometimes become part of the family, e.g. *Paddington Bear* and *Stuart Little*. Children's picture books often feature animals as substitute humans, e.g. *Guess How Much I Love You* and the *Frog and Toad* series by Arnold Lobel. Jackie French and Bruce Whatley depict wombats as wild animals, albeit with endearing human-like qualities. Novels such as *Watership Down*, or Rod Clements' delightful picture books *Edward the Emu* and its companion *Edwina the Emu*, and many, many others, come somewhere in between realism and anthropomorphism/fantasy.

Discuss other animal books your students might have read, including picture books, novels and non-fiction. Create a list of categories of animal stories, introducing them to concepts such as anthropomorphism, and discussing genres such as fables, Dreamtime stories, realism and fantasy. Some suggested categories:

Fables e.g. Aesop

Mythical creatures e.g. dragon stories

True animal stories e.g. *Owen and Mzee: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship* by Isabella Hatkoff, Paula Kahumbu, Craig Hatkoff and Peter Greste

Pet stories e.g. *I Want a Cat* by Tony Ross

Toy stories e.g. *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* by Kate DiCamillo

Animals dressed as humans e.g. *The Wind in the Willows*

Animal fantasies e.g. *The Chronicles of Narnia, Dot and the Kangaroo*

Nature or realistic animal stories e.g. *Black Beauty*

Non-fiction

Environmental stories

As you discuss the various categories of animal stories, ask students to define the features of each category. They may find there are grey areas between some of them. When you have created your list of categories, add books and stories to each category as students mention them. Continue to add to the list as the study of *Dexter: The Courageous Koala* continues.

In pairs, ask students to choose one of the animal books from the class list. Make sure you get a good range of types of stories from the list of categories. The pairs are to read the book, and prepare a five-minute presentation to the class, focusing on the features of the book that make it a particular type of animal story, what its best (and worst!) features are, and their personal responses to the book. Encourage them to use their personal, social, cultural and literary repertoires and the social, historical and cultural context of the book to help shape their presentation. They might also like to make some point of comparison to *Dexter: The Courageous Koala*.

Some ideas on giving book talks can be found at:

<http://www.slideshare.net/ruthfleet/how-to-give-a-book-talk>

'Think like a koala.' p. 100

When creating characters, human or animal, writers must consider the language that would be appropriate to the character. Considerations include the character's age, nationality, interests, values, beliefs and knowledge, and the time and place in which the character lives. As Nancy Lamb notes, 'There's a difference between "I dunno" and "I haven't the foggiest notion."' Your character's speech should reveal who your

character is.' (Lamb, 2001, p. 170) This is also true of any third person narration that presents the character's thoughts or point of view.

Jesse Blackadder has carefully considered the language she uses to represent the koala point of view. There are no references in literal or figurative language that would be outside of the koalas' 'world view' or experience. The koalas also do not have any human-like abilities that koalas do not actually have (e.g. koalas can in fact see colour — note Dexter sees the blood on his injured mother as red, p. 52). Note also that while the animals feel emotions such as fear, grief and the desire for comfort, there are limits to the human-like emotions they are allowed to feel, e.g. the mother is described as being amused, but the word 'love' is not used. However, it is arguable that the animals' behaviour demonstrates what we as humans would describe as love.

As a creative writing exercise, ask the students to choose an animal they would like to write about as a character in a story. The rules are that the story must stick entirely to the facts of what is possible for that animal's behaviour. Emotions may be described, but may often be more convincingly depicted through the animal's behaviour.

Ask the students to write a scene or short story from the point of view of their animal. They may prefer to write the story in first person, but encourage them to use the third person voice, as the author does in *Dexter: The Courageous Koala*. It would also be worthwhile to have a conversation about the advantages and disadvantages of first and third person narratives, and discuss why the author chose third person for both the human and animal narratives in *Dexter: The Courageous Koala*.

If students need some guidance in what to write, suggest they put their animal characters in peril: a cat stuck up a tree; a pet budgie that has escaped its cage; a kangaroo in a bushfire; a fish trying not to get caught in a net. Using Jesse Blackadder's writing as a model, encourage them to 'think like a koala' (or a cat, or a budgie, a kangaroo or a fish ...) as they write their story. Encourage them to use figurative language (see the following exercise) such as is used in *Dexter: The Courageous Koala* to evoke emotion, mood and suspense. Remind them that humans and animals have five senses and encourage them to use sound, smell, touch and taste, where appropriate, as well as visual images.

Language study

Figurative language

The author makes particularly effective use of figurative language in the scenes depicting the koalas. One of the most dramatic is the scene when the cyclone

destroys the tree the koalas are sheltering in (pp. 67–69). Ask the students to identify examples of figurative language in this or another scene of your choosing. They should be able to identify examples of personification, imagery, metaphor and simile, as well as examples of alliteration and assonance.

Discuss how the vocabulary choices and the use of these devices evoke responses from the reader — do we feel tense, afraid, upset or worried as the storm approaches Dexter and his mother? How does the author's language choices contribute to these responses?

Connotation/denotation

Look for examples of words that may have a different *connotation* (the idea or feeling it evokes) to its *denotation* (literal meaning), e.g. the use of the word 'wild' to describe koalas on page 53. Consider the effect an author's choice of words can have when the connotation is significantly different to the denotation.

Structure

According to author Libby Gleeson, structure is 'the way the story is put together. The scaffolding upon which elements of the story must be carried.' (Gleeson, 1999) Nancy Lamb describes it as 'a series of road signs posted along the journey of your story'. (Lamb, 2001) Finding the shape of the story can be an effective way of helping readers identify patterns within a story, related to character and theme.

In *Dexter: The Courageous Koala*, author Jesse Blackadder has constructed a dual narrative. One story is that of Ashley, the human protagonist; paralleling Ashley's story is that of the young koala 'Youngster', who Ashley will come to know as Dexter. The characters' two stories meet at the end of Chapter 10, when Ashley finds the joey and his badly injured mother after a cyclone destroys the tree they have been sheltering in.

Jesse Blackadder makes points of comparison between her human and animal protagonists in scenes that are juxtaposed together, drawing our attention to the shared experiences of humans (especially children) and animals. In groups, allocate the chapters that include the dual narrative of Ashley's and Dexter's stories. Have the students complete the following chart, asking them to find points of similarity and difference between the experiences of Ashley and Dexter in scenes that are *juxtaposed* together. In the final column, ask the students to provide examples from the text where language or other connections are made between the characters. Note: they may note other points of connection between the human and koala stories, e.g. Micky's injury. Encourage them to include these in the chart.

| Chapter | Ashley | Dexter | Similarities | Differences | Examples from the text |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|--|---|---|
| 1 | Ashley is at a rock-climbing centre. | Dexter's first climb. | Dexter and Ashley are both scared. | Dexter has his mum to protect him; Ashley has the belayer but no-one she is close to to help her. | 'She was so scared of the drop below her.' |
| Summary of Chapter 1 | | | They both want to give up but keep trying. | | 'A rush of fear. He gathers himself to try again.' |
| | | | They both fall but neither are hurt. | | Compare the belayer's response to Ashley: 'What happened?' to the koala mother's: 'You did it. Next time will be easier.' |

The other chapters with dual narratives are: 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 17, 19, 22, 23, 25.

Come together and discuss the students' findings.

Narrative time and tense

Draw to the students' attention the fact that the author employs different tenses in the scenes focusing on Ashley and Dexter. Ashley's scenes are told in the past tense, Dexter's in the present. Discuss why the author may have made this choice and what effect it has on the reader. Ask them to consider which tense might be the most appropriate to use in their own imaginative writing.

Jargon and acronyms

Draw up a list of the uses of jargon (specialised language with specific usage and meanings in context of a profession, sport or other activity, e.g. 'leaf' to describe the branches of gum leaves collected to feed rescued koalas) and initials/acronyms (words made out of the initials of a title or name, e.g. BOM for Board of Meteorology). Define the examples of jargon and acronyms. What other examples are the students familiar with? Considering social and cultural context, when are

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such language uses useful, and when might they present a disadvantage for some people?

Students may enjoy making up their own acronyms and jargon — which can act as a private code! — keeping in mind the previous discussion about the potential sense of exclusion using such language can have for others 'outside' the group familiar with them.

GEOGRAPHY

'Geography finished last week.' p. 42

Place names

Dexter and his mother have names for the various trees in their colony: The Hidden, The Safe, The Hungry, The Dry. These names are reminiscent of Aboriginal Australian names for places and sites of significance, where the name itself often carries both spiritual and cultural significance, often referring to the geographical features of the place and being a practical 'guide' to what the place offers in the way of food, water, etc:

Indigenous placenames have developed as an essential aspect in traditional stories and a key tool for moving through and surviving in the Australian landscape. The content of the story the names feature in and the often highly descriptive name of a place (for example, Manaji being the Warumungu name for a site where a group of ancestral beings dig bush potatoes and Manaji also being the Warumungu word for bush potatoes) are extremely useful aides to knowing the value of various sites as good water and food sources.*

From Indigenous Placenames

<http://www.ourlanguages.net.au/languages/aboriginal-place-names/item/77-indigenous-placenames.html>

This information is from the [Australian National Placenames Survey, Indigenous Languages Fact Sheet](#), written by, and republished with permission of, Claire Hill. Claire notes that much of the information in this section is indebted to Hercus and Simpson, 2002.

* The Warumungu people are from the Northern Territory. Their language is classified as 'living', unlike many Indigenous Australian languages.

Research the place names of your local area. What Indigenous language are any Aboriginal place names from? What is their significance? What is the history of other non-Aboriginal place names in your area? Make a map of your local area with

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markers for place names and a paragraph or two explaining the history and meaning of the names.

References:

Koch, Harold and Hercus, Luise (eds), *Aboriginal Placenames: Naming and Re-Naming the Australian Landscape*, ANU Press (2009)

NSW Atlas of Aboriginal Places

<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/aboriginalplaces/>

Our Languages website

<http://www.ourlanguages.net.au/languages/aboriginal-place-names.html>

Activity

Have the students choose a place that is important to them. It might be their home or even a single room (bedroom), a local park, the school yard, a farm, camping ground, beach or any other place they know well and is important to them. Using the names the koalas give to the trees in their colony as a model, ask the students to come up with names to identify sites of significance within their special place, e.g. their bed might be The Cosy; a treehouse might be The Lookout; a swimming pool might be The Cool, and so on. Have them draw or photograph their special place and label it with their Names of Significance. They may also like to consider naming different times of the day, or even of the year, as the koalas do (The Bright is daytime).

Mapping activity

Numerous geographical sites are mentioned in the novel, all of them actual suburbs, towns, addresses and other places in New South Wales and Queensland. Using Google maps and paper tourist maps, chart Ashley's story, from her home in Five Dock in Sydney's Inner West to her adventures on the far north coast of New South Wales and Gold Coast, Queensland. Place names are listed during a storm report update on page 105. It is less clear exactly where Micky's property Toad Hall is located, although we know it is in the area of the Byron Shire with a creek that floods during high rains, cutting it off for up to weeks at a time, and that it is close enough to the coast to be able to see the ocean. It is also close to a koala colony and the vegetation around the property is described in Chapter 5. Provide detailed local maps of the Byron Shire and ask the students in groups to decide where the fictional Toad Hall might be located, given the clues given in the text.

SCIENCE

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Cyclones

Cyclone Jasper was an actual tropical cyclone that developed in the eastern Coral Sea, east of Australia, in March 2009. However, it did not cause as much damage in Australia as the fictional version does in *Dexter: The Courageous Koala*. This was based on tropical Cyclone Oswald, which passed over part of Queensland and New South Wales in January 2013 and caused widespread damage. You may like to consider the students doing a research study on cyclones, and on cyclone names, as a cross-curricular addition to the novel study.

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McDonald, Lorraine, *A Literature Companion for Teachers*, PETAA, Newtown (2013)

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Websites

Friends of the Koala

(Northern Rivers NSW conservation group, cited by the author in her acknowledgements)

<http://www.friendsofthekoala.org/>

Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary Hospital

(Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary is a major tourist attraction on the Queensland Gold Coast, a few hours north of where Ashley's aunt Micky lives; the hospital attached to the Sanctuary, which features in *Dexter: The Courageous Koala*, treats more than 8000 native animals, reptiles and birds every year)

<http://www.cws.org.au/wildlife-hospital/>

Australian Koala Foundation

<https://www.savethekoala.com/>

NSW Department of Environment and Heritage Koala Information Page

(the second link has information about the seven major koala habitats in New South Wales and lists the eucalypt species they prefer to eat)

<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/animals/thekoala.htm>

<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/animals/koalahabitat.htm>

Victorian Department of Environment and Primary Industries

<http://www.depi.vic.gov.au/environment-and-wildlife/wildlife/koalas-in-victoria>

Queensland Government Koala Mapping

<http://www.ehp.qld.gov.au/wildlife/koalas/mapping/>

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http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/managing-natural-resources/Plants_Animals/Living_with_wildlife/Koalas

Foundation for National Parks and Wildlife

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Federal Government Department of the Environment

<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/factsheet-koala-populations-queensland-nsw-act-national>

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Other books by Jesse Blackadder

Paruku: The Desert Brumby, HarperCollins (2014)

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About the author of the notes

Judith Ridge is a children's and youth literature specialist from Sydney. Originally a secondary English and history teacher, Judith has worked as a children's book editor, critic, and teacher of creative writing and children's literature at universities and private colleges. She spent a total of eight years as an editor at the NSW *School Magazine* and for seven years was program director for WestWords — the Western Sydney Young People's Literature Development Project. She has also worked on programs such as the Nestlé Write Around Australia children's creative writing program and has curated the School Days program for Sydney Writers' Festival. She teaches at the Australian Catholic University in Children's Literature, Early Childhood and Primary Education subjects. Judith is a Churchill Fellow and an Honorary Associate of the School of Education and Social Science at the University of Sydney. Judith operates Misrule freelance editorial, writing and educational consultancy services and she has a Masters in Children's Literature from Macquarie University. Her website is misrule.com.au/wordpress