



## *Taking Tom Murray Home*

By Tim Slee

### Summary

The winner of the inaugural Banjo Prize, *Taking Tom Murray Home* is a funny, moving, bittersweet Australian story of fires, families and the restorative power of community.

Bankrupt dairy farmer Tom Murray decides he'd rather sell off his herd and burn down his own house than hand them over to the bank. But something goes tragically wrong, and Tom dies in the blaze. His wife, Dawn, doesn't want him to have died for nothing and decides to hold a funeral procession for Tom as a protest, driving 350 kilometres from Yardley in country Victoria to bury him in Melbourne where he was born. To make a bigger impact she agrees with some neighbours to put his coffin on a horse and cart and take it slow – real slow.

But on the night of their departure, someone burns down the local bank. And as the motley funeral procession passes through Victoria, there are more mysterious arson attacks. Dawn has five days to get to Melbourne. Five days, five more towns, and a state ready to explode in flames ...

Told with a laconic, deadpan wit, *Taking Tom Murray Home* is a timely, thought-provoking, heart-warming, quintessentially Australian story like no other. It's a novel about grief, pain, anger and loss, yes, but it's also about hope – and how community, friends and love trump pain and anger, every time.

### Key Learning Outcomes

ACELA1563, ACELT1639, ACELT1641, ACELT1642, ACELY1750, ACELY1752

### Themes

Grief and loss, Reconciliation, Community, Journey, Conflict, Power, Protest

Recommended Ages: 14+

ISBN: 9781460757864

Notes by: Mandy Newman and Jemma Myors

Date of Publication: August 2019

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## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### Before Reading

*Taking Tom Murray Home* is a contemporary novel, set in rural Victoria, amidst an extended drought.

### Context and setting

- Read this story about farmer Bill Mott: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-06-22/bill-mott-banking-royal-commission/9891630>
  - After reading Bill's story, in small groups research five ways farmers and farms are put under pressure during a drought in Australia.
  - What role does the weather play in the lives of farmers?
  - How much debt do farms and farmers typically carry?
  - Define the following terms: mortgage, overdraft and interest rates.
- In small groups, find out five facts about the Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry, also known as the Banking Royal Commission.
  - When did it take place?
  - What role do banks play in the lives of farmers?
  - Are banks more powerful than farmers? Why?
  - Why are banks important to farmers and what kind of power can they exert over individuals and families?
  - What were the farmers who spoke at the Royal Commission angry about? Were they justified?
  - Have a class discussion on the following topic:
    - If your family couldn't pay a large debt for your home, what would your options be?
- Write a 400-word story, from the perspective of a farmer who has just been told that his or her family farm is about to be taken by a bank. Include sensory details. Describe the landscape. Show how the farmer feels. Use figurative language to help your readers understand how the farmer feels.

### Themes

- What happens when we grieve?
  - Physically, emotionally, psychologically.
  - Research some of the ways that people from a range of cultures respond when someone dies.
  - Is there a right or wrong way to grieve? Why?

- Think about who makes your community – your local doctor, the sport's club, your hairdresser, local shopkeepers, your neighbours, a school teacher, your family and friends and so on. This list will be different for everyone.
  - Draw a picture of all the different people and groups who make up your local community.
  - How do you think your community would respond if one of your family members died unexpectedly?
  - What is an issue that you think would bring all the members of your community together? Why?
  - What groups or institutions yield power in your community or shape the lives of the members of your community?
- Protest is an important theme in the novel. Read this story about Greta Thunberg and her trip across the Atlantic to protest against climate change: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-08-29/swedish-teen-greta-thunberg-un-summit-new-york-boat-arrival/11459966>
  - Do you think Greta's protest was an effective form of protest for a young person? Why or why not?
  - Write a 250-word opinion piece about Greta's actions. Agree or disagree – just make sure you state a firm position. Include at least three rhetorical techniques.
- What are some of the issues you feel you could protest about?
  - What forms would your protest take and why?
  - Create a placard with persuasive words and a strong image to express your protest.

### Narrative Techniques

- Research congenital analgesia. You might like to start here:
  - <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-18713585>
  - <https://brainworldmagazine.com/feeling-no-pain-like-live-cipa/>
  - What are the main problems with having congenital analgesia?
- The funeral procession across Victoria is a symbol for community and political protest. A funeral procession can represent the grief and sadness of the individuals who have lost a family member. It can also symbolise a community coming together to support the family who have lost a loved one because of unfair treatment.
  - Think of another symbol you could use to illustrate a community coming together to support each other. Create two different visual representations of the symbol.
  - Fire is also a symbol and a metaphor in the novel. Fire can represent warmth or passion burning within you or destruction or rebirth. Write a 12-line poem, using fire as a metaphor to represent the idea of passion, warmth, destruction or rebirth.

### During Reading

- Ask students to create a visual summary of the journey of the funeral procession and all the different groups and individuals who join along the way.
  - Include the key events and locations, important characters, as well as how the characters develop and change over the course of the story.
  - Track all the different responses to grief exhibited by the main characters.

- Focus on the end of the journey or the denouement – the final part or conclusion and point of reflection of the story.
  - What happens at the end of the journey and how do you as a reader feel? Why?
  - How do Jack, Jenny and Dawn change over the course of the novel?
  - What does Jack learn about life as a consequence of the procession?

### Narrative Techniques

- In small groups, annotate chapter one, to find examples of how Tim Slee builds a picture of the narrator in the reader's imagination.
  - Write a paragraph, with three examples of evidence, to show how the author creates the distinctive voice of Jack.
- Why has the author chosen to use this first-person perspective to tell the story?
  - Rewrite the opening or closing scene from the perspective of Dawn, Jenny or the police officer, Karsi.
  - How does this change the story?
- Is the novel more appealing to teenagers if the narrator is a young person as well?
  - What are the limitations of using a character Jack's age to tell the story?
  - This novel was written for adults. Why do you think that Tim Slee chose to tell the story from the point of view of a teenager?
- Rewrite the opening, ending or another scene of your choice using the third person.
  - What do you lose or gain from switching from the first to the third person?
- Rewrite another chapter of the book from the point of view of another character.
  - How does this change the information conveyed to the audience?
  - If you have finished the book, you may like to choose a chapter and character which gives away the twist at the end of the novel. How does this change the story?
- Throughout the novel the author uses fire as a symbol. What ideas are symbolised by fire throughout the novel?
  - How does the use of fire link to the theme of protest? (Think about figurative fire such as #BURN as well as the actual ones.)
- In the final few chapters, the author makes several revelations. Make a list of all the things that you find out only at the climax and resolution/denouement.
  - Which of these revelations change the way you see the events of the novel?
  - Are there clues to any of these earlier in the text?
  - What is the purpose of holding back these facts until the very end of the novel?

### Themes

- Grief affects the members of the Murray family quite differently. Outline the main ways it affects Jack, Jenny and Dawn.
  - How does this change over the course of the novel?
  - How does having Dorotea's analgesia influence the way that Jack and Jenny experience and express their grief for losing their father and their home?

- The small town of Yardley is a very tight-knit community, and initially this is the only community that Jack knows.
  - How does this change as the funeral procession makes its way to Melbourne?
  - What other communities is Jack a member of by the end of the book?
  - Does this change how he views the events of the novel?
- How does the funeral procession change as it winds its way towards Melbourne?
  - What is Grace's stated intention for conducting the procession at the beginning?
  - What affect does the growing community around the procession have on what it means?
  - Do the arson attacks change the purpose of Grace and her supporters?
  - In your opinion, does the procession achieve anything? (Support your response with evidence from the text.)

### After Reading

- Discuss why you think Tim Slee chose to write a novel about a farmer and his relationship to the land and the bank.
- Discuss this statement in relation to the novel: 'Where there is power, there is resistance.'
- Fire is a bringer of death, but it is also a bringer of life. Discuss the symbolic importance of fire in *Taking Tom Murray Home*.
- Grief is devastating, but being part a community can ease the sadness. Does the journey assist Jack to reconcile with his father's death? Discuss.
- How does the author use narrative techniques to convey the central themes of the novel?

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Slee is an Australian journalist with a wanderlust. Born in Papua New Guinea to Australian parents who sprang from sheep country in the Mid-North and Far North of South Australia, he worked for several years for the *Stock Journal* in Adelaide before moving to Canberra and then Sydney, where he worked for the Attorney General's Department. Since then he has lived in Denmark, Canada and Australia, and is currently on contract in Denmark again with a multinational pharmaceutical company. Although, according to his favourite airline, he has been around the world with them 22 times and visited 54 countries, Australia is still his physical and emotional home base. *Taking Tom Murray Home* is his first novel, and the winner of the inaugural Banjo Prize.

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