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Boy Swallows Universe

By Trent Dalton

Summary

Brisbane, 1983: A lost father, a mute brother, a mum in jail, a heroin dealer for a stepfather and a notorious crim for a babysitter. It's not as if Eli's life isn't complicated enough already. He's just trying to follow his heart, learning what it takes to be a good man, but life just keeps throwing obstacles in the way – not least of which is Tytus Broz, legendary Brisbane drug dealer.

But Eli's life is about to get a whole lot more serious. He's about to fall in love. And, oh yeah, he has to break into Boggo Road Gaol on Christmas Day, to save his mum.

A story of brotherhood, true love and the most unlikely of friendships, *Boy Swallows Universe* will be the most heartbreaking, joyous and exhilarating novel you will read all year.

Key Learning Outcomes

Year 10

ACELA1565, ACELA1569, ACELA1570, ACELA1571, ACELT1639, ACELT1641, ACELT1812, ACELT1642, ACELT1774

Senior English – Unit 1

ACEEN001, ACEEN002, ACEEN004, ACEEN005, ACEEN007, ACEEN008, ACEEN009, ACEEN010, ACEEN018, ACEEN019, ACEEN020

Themes

Fate, Family, Love, Time, Trauma, Resilience, Good vs Evil, Choices

Recommended Ages: 15+

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Year 10 English

By the end of this unit, students:

- understand the relationships between purpose, context and audience and how these relationships influence texts and their meaning
- investigate how text structures and language features are used to convey ideas and represent people and events in a range of texts
- create oral, written and multimodal texts appropriate for different audiences, purposes and contexts.

Secondary English Unit 1

By the end of this unit, students:

- understand the relationships between purpose, context and audience and how these relationships influence texts and their meaning
- investigate how text structures and language features are used to convey ideas and represent people and events in a range of texts
- create oral, written and multimodal texts appropriate for different audiences, purposes and contexts.

Genre/Tropes

Coming of age/Bildungsroman

Magic/Magical realism

Humour

Irony

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT AND AUTHOR

Boy Swallows Universe is the beautifully written story of Eli Bell, a boy with big ideas, extraordinary confidence and limited means. Trent Dalton has created an engrossing novel that invites the reader to share and empathise with Eli's experience. Full of vivid imagery, lyrical writing and magical realism, it will engage students and allow them to examine the following ideas:

- What does it mean to be good?
- How do our early experiences shape the person we become?
- Families are complex and dynamic, and love is shown in a variety of ways.

Eli Bell grows up in the outskirts of Brisbane in the 1980s – a time, long before the modern digital era, when most children lived their lives outdoors, playing and roaming their neighbourhoods. Dalton creates a rich sense of nostalgia with his depiction of Eli and August's home turf, a quintessential working-class, multicultural Australian suburb.

The Bell family face issues that weave throughout the story – drug abuse and violence, as well as criminal activity and separation. Dalton thoughtfully explores this experience from Eli's naïve perspective, with an understatedness that allows the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. This is particularly evident as the narrative gradually reveals the breadth of trauma Eli and his brother, August, have experienced. Utilising a range of language and literary devices, Dalton shows how children and young people draw on their inherent resilience to suppress trauma, retain trust and find hope in dire situations. In particular, elements of magical realism in the novel emulate a child-like viewpoint and create a sense of mystery that maintains reader interest.

The importance of relationships to Eli and August is evident, particularly Eli's friendship with Slim Halliday, which is juxtaposed with his encounters with the evil Tytus Broz. One of the novel's overarching questions – what does it mean to be good? – is highlighted in the characterisation of these peripheral characters, as well as by Eli's own mission to do the right thing. Different characters move into Eli's life at different stages and leave a lasting impression on him. The love between Eli, his family, and other important people is regularly expressed and emphasised, and motivates Eli in his many quests. Dalton's depiction of the subtle ironies of daily life also allows the reader to empathise with the characters. Despite the seriousness of the content, there is a great deal of humour in the story. This humour acts as a reprieve to some of the serious content matter.

Trent Dalton is an Australian long-form journalist and *Boy Swallows Universe* is his first work of fiction. In interviews, Dalton has acknowledged that there are many autobiographical elements in the story: Slim Halliday was a real person in Dalton's childhood, and many characters represent important people in his life (see additional resources at the end of these notes). Dalton has received numerous awards for his journalism and since publication *Boy Swallows Universe* has received many prizes, including the 2019 ABIA Book of the Year Award and the Debut Fiction prize at the 2019 Indie Book Awards.

Trent Dalton also writes screenplays for film and television.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Before Reading

These activities are designed to encourage students to think about how childhood memories and experiences shape adults. They will help create a frame of reference for considering the key questions that inform their reading such as 'What does it mean to be good?' and 'How do our early experiences shape the person we become?'

- Each student makes a list of people they feel have had an impact on their life. Then, in a group, students discuss a quality that the person they have nominated brought to their life. How might this inform who they become as adults?
- Class brainstorm – what factors can affect a person's memory of an event or period of time?
- Students identify an important memory and make a list of the factors that may have influenced how they remember it.

- As a class, students identify a memory they have that others share, such as an important family occasion, a specific Christmas, or a special day at school. Ask students to write down what they remember of this event, and then have them ask someone else who was there to write down what they remember and compare their recollections. What is similar and what is different? What may have affected these differing memories?

During Reading

Character

- Students create a Character Profile table with the following headings, which they will add to as they continue to read the novel and think about the questions below:

Character	Life details/ history	Qualities and attributes	Important relationships	Important decisions and choices in life	Changes in their circumstances	Key quotes
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- What is your impression of Eli?
- Who are the important people in Eli's life? How does he interact with them?
- What characteristics of Eli's personality stand out for you? Which examples best support your ideas?
- Investigate the symbolism of wrens. In what ways does the blue wren symbolise Eli?
- Why is Slim so important to the family?
- Select 2–3 more characters to analyse using the above questions. How do we see them evolve and change throughout the story? What do they represent and how does the author create this impression?

Context and setting

- Consider the community that Eli and August are growing up in. How would you describe it? What do you notice about the people the boys and their family interact with?
- Based on the descriptions in the novel, what impression is the author giving of Darra and the suburbs Eli and August are growing up in? Provide evidence to support your answer.
- How do August and Eli feel about their lives and their community? What role do they feel they play in their community?
- 'Nothing connects a city quite like South-East Asian heroin' (p. 136). How does this quote reflect the setting and context of the story? What impression is Dalton aiming to give?
- Eli is very open about the significant role that addiction plays in his life: from his mum and Lyle both taking and dealing heroin, to his father's alcoholic binges. Why do you think Eli is so honest about these aspects of his life?

Narrative Structure

- What is your perception of Eli as the storyteller?
- How might the story be different if August was the narrator? How does August observe the world around him?
- How reliable is Eli in his memory of events? What are readers left wondering about in the story?
- Is there anything important that you think Eli leaves out of the story? Are these omissions deliberate, or do they tell us something about Eli?
- Select another character in the story whose thoughts and feelings aren't directly expressed to the reader. Choose a significant event and write one or two paragraphs in first person from the perspective of that character.
- How does the author use humour throughout the story? What is Dalton's purpose in including humour?

Literary Devices/Language Features/Stylistic Features

Various literary devices and language features are utilised throughout *Boy Swallows Universe*. Additionally, elements of magical realism add charm to the story, capture the innocence of Eli and disguise the harsher aspects of what the boys are exposed to every day. Dalton also foreshadows many of the conclusions to the story as Eli grows up and interacts with his expanding world.

- Define and explore the following literary devices and language features, then identify examples within the text:

Alliteration – repetition of consonants at the beginning of words in a sentence.

Text examples: 'Lena died loud, a violent cacophony of crashing steel and a Frankie Valli high note, returning from Toowoomba's Carnival of Flowers along the Warrego Highway at twilight.' (p. 20); 'That rainbow of dirt reminds me of the milky moons in my thumbnails' (pp. 450–451).

Allegory – the representation of abstract ideas through characterisation, plot development or an overall narrative.

Text examples: the juxtaposition of certain characters to represent the complexity of Good and Evil, particularly between Slim Halliday and Tytus Broz. Both are men of notoriety who aren't what they seem at face value.

Allusion – reference to another text, person or event with historical, cultural or political significance.

Text examples: Houdini – a famous magician known for sensational escape acts; *Papillon* – the autobiography of Henri Charrière, a criminal known for escaping from jail.

Epigram – concise statements used repeatedly throughout a text.

Text examples: 'Your end is a dead blue wren', 'Do your time before it does you', 'Boy swallows universe'.

Foreshadowing – references in the text that hint at what will happen later in the story.

Text examples: The Red Phone, the Moon Pool, 'Your end is a dead blue wren', Caitlyn Spies, August's cryptic predictions.

Imagery – crafting language to powerfully affect reader responses to a text and produce an image of special or symbolic meaning.

Text examples: 'Dad is sleeping by the side of the toilet. He passed out directly after vomiting into the porcelain bowl and he sleeps soundly now beneath the toilet roll holder, and when he breathes out, air from his nostrils blows three hanging sheets of one-ply like a white flag of surrender blowing in the wind' (p. 355); 'I can smell his underarms. I can smell his Old Spice cologne and his clothes smell like cigarettes. He's leaning over me with his weight on my right forearm and his big hands have bones of iron and they are trying to spread my right forefinger out, my lucky forefinger with my lucky freckle on my lucky middle knuckle.' (p. 150)

Irony – a technique in which a scenario or idea is presented as different or the opposite of what is expected, usually to humorous effect.

Text examples: Eli breaks into Boggo Road Prison on Christmas Day to see his mum, without getting caught, thanks to Slim's suggestion that if you believe you are invisible you will be. Eli falls off the prison wall after trying to scale it.

Symbolism – a device used to represent an aspect of the story.

Text examples: The blue wren and Eli: adventurous, resourceful, bold, determined, friendly and light-hearted.

- How do each of these literary devices and language features impact on the story? How are you as the reader affected by these techniques?
- Consider author intention – what is the purpose of utilising these devices and features?
- What is achieved overall? What ideas/ perspectives and viewpoints are represented via these devices and features?

Key Quotes and Passages:

'Darra is a dream, a stench, a spilt garbage bin, a cracked mirror, a paradise, a bowl of Vietnamese noodle soup filled with prawns, domes of plastic crab meat, pig ears and pig knuckles and pig belly. Darra is a girl washed down a drainpipe, a boy with snot slipping from his nose so ripe it glows on Easter night, a teenage girl stretched across a train track waiting for the express to Central and beyond, a South African man smoking Sudanese weed, a Filipino man injecting Afghani dope next door to a girl from Cambodia sipping milk from Queensland's Darling Downs. Darra is my quiet sigh, my reflection on war, my dumb pre-teen longing, my home.' (p. 13)

'Australian childhoods are so idyllic and joyous, so filled with beach visits and backyard games of cricket, that Australian adulthoods can't possibly meet our childhood expectations.' (p. 58)

'Do your time before it does you' (p. 88)

'Slim's always talking about this, the little movies within the movie of your own life. Life lived in multiple dimensions. Life lived from multiple vantage points. One moment in time – several people meeting at a circular dining table before taking their seats – but a moment with multiple points of view. In these moments time doesn't just move forward, it can move sideways, expanding to accommodate infinite points of view, and if you add up all these vantage point moments you might have something close to eternity passing sideways within a single moment. Or something like that.' (p. 110)

'Nothing connects a city quite like South-East Asian heroin.' (p. 136)

'I feel those two boys are planning something,' Mrs Birkbeck says. 'It feels like they're heading towards some destination that maybe none of us will know about until it's too late.' (p. 306)

'Time is the answer to everything, of course. The answer to our prayers and murders and losses and ups and downs and loves and deaths.' (p. 317)

After Reading

Extended text response questions

- 'Love, above all else, is threaded through this novel ... Ultimately, it's a love story' – Trent Dalton. To what extent do you agree with this statement? Identify evidence to support your response.
- How do time and magic influence Eli's experiences throughout *Boy Swallows Universe*?
- Dalton uses a variety of literary and language devices to mask the realities of Eli and August's lives. Discuss.
- Explore the ways Eli's identity is shaped by his experiences and interaction with the wider world. Does he discover what it means to be 'good'?

Additional Links

- Trent Dalton on the inspiration for *Boy Swallows Universe*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FoSRdmZkQ14>
- Trent Dalton introduces *Boy Swallows Universe* and discusses his favourite books:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSBqR8LESbE>
- Trent Dalton: Why I Wrote *Boy Swallows Universe*:
<https://www.harpercollins.com.au/blog/2018/06/26/trent-dalton-why-i-wrote-boy-swallows-universe/>
- Bird Symbolism and Meaning: <https://www.realityfiles.com/master-archive/resources/bird-symbolism-meanings-full-resource-animal-spirit-guides-omens-spirit-animals-totems/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Trent Dalton is a staff writer for the *Weekend Australian Magazine* and a former assistant editor of *The Courier Mail*. He's a two-time winner of a Walkley Award for Excellence in Journalism, a four-time winner of a Kennedy Award for Excellence in NSW Journalism and a four-time winner of the national News Awards Features Journalist of the Year. His debut novel, *Boy Swallows Universe*, published by HarperCollins in 2018, is a much-loved national bestseller and critically acclaimed, winning the 2019 Indie Book of the Year Award, the MUD Literary Prize, the UTS Glenda Adams Award for New Writing and the People's Choice Award at the 2019 NSW Premier's Literary Awards. In addition, at the 2019 Australian Book Industry Awards, the novel won a record four ABIA Awards, including the prestigious Book of the Year Award. *Boy Swallows Universe* has been published across thirty-four English language and translation territories.