

LONGACRE PRESS RESOURCE KIT

Bernard Beckett

Home Boys

*'This place wasn't hell. Hell wasn't a place.
Hell was not having a place.'*

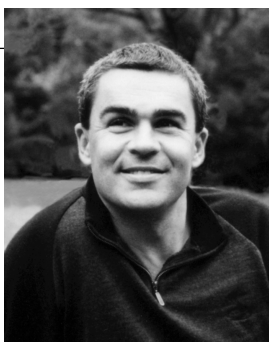
IMAGINE you live in London immediately following the Second World War. Imagine you've been told to pack your bag, but not told where you're going. Or for how long. Imagine you are sent halfway across the world because someone thinks it will be better for you.

This is what happened to Colin. This is his story. And Dougal's.

Bernard Beckett's powerful novel *Home Boys* captures the world of two boys on the run. Two boys who need each other. Two boys in search of a place to belong.

An exceptional story; tender as it is brutal, spirited as it is heartbreaking.

'Impressive... everything feels carefully observed and immediate.' Booknotes 2004

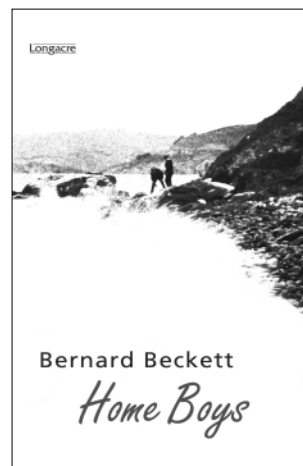


BERNARD BECKETT is one of New Zealand's pre-eminent writers of young adult fiction. He's a teacher who loves his job, currently at Onslow College. He's passionate about outdoor education and drama, writing and directing his own plays.

Home Boys is his fifth novel, *Lester*, *Red Cliff*, *Jolt* and *No Alarms* having received between them critical acclaim, a short-listing in the New Zealand Post Book Awards and a listing on the Notable New Zealand Young Adult Books. Recently released is a comic novel *Malcolm and Juliet*.

RESOURCE KIT CONTAINS:

- Discussion Topics
- Drama
- Written Comprehension
 - Understanding Literary Techniques*
 - Creative Responses*
 - Formal Essays*
- Research
- Debate
- Investigating the text by Bernard Beckett



SPECIFICATIONS:

- NZ Young Adult Fiction • Published 2003
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PART ONE

Discussion Topics

- On page 11 of the novel, Colin seems to believe that “problems are only problems if you mention them”. Does this attitude apply for him throughout the novel? Does it aid or hinder him, in your opinion?
- What triggers Colin’s curiosity about the Italian prisoners? What in particular draws Colin to Gino? Does this friendship endure or survive, do you think, by the end of the novel? What might a further, final encounter between the two be like, beyond the events described in *Home Boys*?
- There are many moments of betrayal in *Home Boys*. What do you think is the greatest? Explain your reasoning.
- Colin needs Dougal more than Dougal needs Colin. Do you agree?
- At the end of the novel, do you feel that Veronica’s chances of happiness and survival are the same as Dougal’s and Colin’s?
- Do you feel that Veronica and Colin have a future together?
- Do you feel hope for any of the young characters at the close of the novel – will they endure in the world beyond Veronica’s fishing village?

Drama

- Take one or two scenes of dialogue in the novel, and turn these into a performance piece for video or live theatre.
- Take one of the dream scenarios in the novel, and use this as a starting point for a piece of surrealist live performance.

Written Comprehension

Understanding Literary Techniques:
Home Boys often makes very effective use of similes and metaphors. Find 5–7 examples that you consider to be outstanding. Describe how they convey their impact, i.e. how they play off their literal and figurative meanings.

Creative Responses:

- The phrase “The Lost Generation” has a specific historical meaning in relation to *Home Boys*. (See the author’s note at the start of the book.) The term has also been used of other groups over time. (E.g., post-World War One, expatriate American artists and writers.) Imagine you are a journalist writing an opinion piece for *The Listener*. You have decided to either (1) apply the phrase to your own generation or (2) apply the phrase to your parents’ generation. Write an article arguing how the label fits the group you’ve chosen.
- Imagine you are a conscientious, genuinely altruistically motivated Welfare Officer. Write a report to your superiors about the conditions you uncover at the Sowbys.
- Write about a dream that reveals something about the fears, hopes, and deeper self either of a fictional character, or of someone close to you.
- Write a monologue from Veronica’s point of view about one of the major events in the novel.

Formal Essays:

1. Assume that literature could be reduced to two main forms: comedy and tragedy. Comedy could be defined as a celebration of life, and tragedy as a recognition of our flaws and mortality. Which of the two modes would *Home Boys* fit into most comfortably? Argue your case with plenty of evidence from the novel.
2. The American author Washington Irving (1787–1879) once wrote that “A woman’s whole history

is a history of the affections.” Argue for or against this statement in relation to Veronica’s character in the novel.

3. “The history of the world is but the biography of great men.” (Thomas Carlyle.) Use *Home Boys* to argue for or against this statement.
4. A national literature is the literature that helps to define and describe life in a particular geographical and political community. How could *Home Boys* be said to define and describe the New Zealand nation to readers?

Research

- What ancient myths or traditions are connected to the area you live in? (These might be about the geological formations or natural features, about the people who first lived there, or about supernatural phenomena.)
- Find out about the roles of working class and middle class women in New Zealand in the era immediately post World War Two. Consider issues like education, employment, childbearing, medical care, social expectations.
- Find out more about the Lost Generation phenomenon.
- Find out more about the lives of itinerant labourers in 1940–1950s New Zealand.

Debate

Divide into affirmative and negative teams to explore the following topics.

1. Trust can only ever be betrayed once.
2. “Hell wasn’t a place. It was not having a place.” (Page 164, *Home Boys*.)

PART TWO

Investigating the text: exercises designed by the author of Home Boys.

Note to teachers:

Each of the following topics is split into three parts.

1. The first exercise involves hunting through the text to find specific evidence on a given point. In each case this can be done individually or in groups.
2. The second exercise involves the students using this evidence to write a response to a particular statement, where they are asked to agree or disagree. If you are keen on exploiting group possibilities, get the students to write their individual responses, then return to their investigation groups. The task for the group is to assess each contribution and then as a team rework the best one into the group response.
3. The third part of each activity is an opportunity to go somewhere different, simply using the book as stimulus. This includes short speeches, creative writing, visual presentation and full class debates.

Each topic can therefore cover at least four lessons, if you have that sort of time to spare.

Topic One: Dreams

How much does the author expect us to accept about the role of dreams in this novel? Is it possible to simply dismiss them as a device for magnifying Colin’s concerns at any given particular point in the story (i.e. in keeping with current scientific thinking on dreams)? Or is the reader of this book forced to believe in a slightly more magical world (i.e. one where dreams are able to point towards future events?)

Make a list of all the dreams in the book. For each one, summarise what the dream is about, and list actual events within the story that it refers to. For each dream, say how believable you find it that such a dream might naturally occur.

Armed with this evidence, write a one page response to the following:

‘Although *Home Boys* is set in a realistic historical setting it is actually a supernatural story.’

Do you agree?

As a follow up activity divide the class into two sides and have one group collect evidence to support the supernatural angle, and the other to refute it. Use this as the basis for a class debate.

Topic Two: Mates

To a large extent, *Home Boys* is an investigation of male mateship. How strong is the friendship between Colin and Dougal at the end of the novel? Go through the text and make a list of all the sacrifices and concessions each makes for the other.

Now write a one page response to the following:

‘Colin and Dougal are thrown together by circumstance, and rely upon one another because they have no choice. They will drift apart once new opportunities express themselves.’

Do you agree?

As a follow up creative writing exercise, imagine an event which would lead to one of the boys betraying the other. Explain what this event is, and then write a page of dialogue, where one boy breaks the news to the other.

Topic Three: Veronica

In any novel, some characters are fleshed out as real people, with complex personalities, personal histories and dilemmas, while others serve the purpose of emotional scenery, simply setting up situations to advance the stories of the key characters.

Think about Veronica’s role in *Home Boys*. Make two lists.

Head the first ‘All the things we know about Veronica’. In this list include any details you can think of, in terms of her family, relationships, personality, past etc. Head the second ‘All the things Veronica does in the story.’

Now write a one page response to the following:

‘In *Home Boys*, the female characters are just used as a way of exploring the stories of the boys. Veronica in particular has little depth, and her actions are ultimately unbelievable because of it.’

Do you agree?

As a follow up activity, have each of the students come up with and deliver a one minute speech from the point of view of another female in the village giving Veronica advice, just before she decides to leave the village. The speech is to be titled ‘Come on Veronica, think harder.’

Topic Four: Imagery

The most lasting impact of a novel is often the visual images it manages to plant in our heads. These can be of an event, a place or something imagined by a protagonist.

For each of the following images, say where it occurs in the book (sometimes more than once) and make a list of the words you associate with each one.

The Grey Man

The burning house

The dead sheep

The cave

The light house

The pinnacles

The ocean

Now choose two, and say what themes in the book they serve to reinforce.

Write a one page response to the following:

‘In *Home Boys* visual imagery is used to say things that the author chooses not to directly comment on.’

Do you agree?

As a follow up activity, have the students produce a design for an alternative book cover for Home Boys, using one of the images discussed above. Have them explain what they hope to have the reader thinking about the book before they open it.