



Deadhead

by Glenn Wood

About the author

Glenn Wood has been writing professionally for over twenty-five years. During that time he has worked extensively in New Zealand's advertising industry, employed as a senior copywriter by many of the country's leading advertising agencies. He has won numerous local and international Advertising Awards.

His first novel 'The Laughing Policeman' was published by Shoal Bay Press in 1998 to popular and critical acclaim. His second book 'Cop Out' was released in 2000 and also received excellent reviews. His first children's book 'The Brain Sucker' was published by Walker Books Australia in 2012 and was nominated for a Sakura Medal in Japan. The sequel 'The Bully Chip' was published in 2013.

Glenn is also the writer of the independently produced movie 'The Catch'. The film had a limited cinema release in 2016 and has been very well received.



Synopsis of novel

Fifteen-year-olds mates Spencer and Regan are classic outsiders. Spencer is highly intelligent and uses his wits to help support his hard working and struggling solo mum, while Regan's parents genuinely don't seem to care for her at all and are more than happy for her to spend most of her time at Spencer's place. Neither fit into the various groups that most kids fit into at school, and this suits Spencer as it allows him to move freely between groups and 'sell' his expertise to make needed money for his household. Early in the novel events take a sinister turn when Spencer falls out with a violent and psychopathic student named Carl, who decides to start a branch of a criminal Asian gang in the neighbourhood known as Yakuza. To get serious protection from Carl, Spencer has the outrageous idea of exhuming the body of a recently slain policeman, Garret Hunter, who has been killed by a notorious criminal mastermind known as The Undertaker, and bringing him back to life via computer operated mechanics he surgically inserts into the policeman's body (Spencer has a well fitted out laboratory in his basement, of course). Regan is pulled into the crazy plan and from there on the story is a hell-for-leather adventure that drags you quickly through a series of increasingly bizarre events, culminating in a major gang on gang battle where all (well, most) of the 'baddies' get their very violent just deserts and the goodies pull through to live another and much wiser day.

Themes / issues

Perhaps the major thematic idea of the novel is the need to celebrate the outsiders amongst us — the ones who survive and thrive against the odds. This is particularly true of youth outsiders who are unable to or who refuse to fit into the stereotypical school groupings, such as the jocks, nerds, fashion queens, musos etc. We need to celebrate those brave enough to forge their own paths.

Despite the macho sounding plot line, the novel pushes the 'women can do anything' trope. Policewoman, Cadence, is by far the toughest cop on her beat and on more than one occasion deals to male toughs in no uncertain fashion. Regan is also very staunch in a tight situation and her bravery and quick thinking play important roles towards the end of the novel. However, the author is also aware that even the strongest women can fall for the hapless males in their lives or fall into the 'I can save them' trap. Cadence and Regan are both aware of their weakness in this area (Cadence/Garret and Regan/Spencer) and avoid the pitfalls that can occur.



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As you would expect, the novel also deals with the old ‘good will always prevail over evil’ theme and also touches on the well-trodden idea that there is some goodness to be found in most criminals, as seen in this novel with Lernas, the Death’s Disciples biker and with Jin, the Yakuza gang leader.

Steer students away from finding thematic ideas with the plot line of ‘monster creation’ as this is just a plot vehicle for character development and more important themes — unless the students wish to go a lot further into the whole idea of the ethics of artificial intelligence/robotics.

Setting

The author maintains an intentional vagueness about specific setting details although, given place names like Stampport and Yellowbridge River, many readers will assume it is somewhere on the USA Eastern Seaboard. We are thrown off course occasionally by New Zealand type clues such as the police in the story setting don’t usually carry arms (unheard of in USA police departments) or two of the bike gang driving a 1972 Valient Charger with crude flames drawn on the bonnet (a popular NZ ‘hoon’ car). We can assume the time period to be present day because of the very up-to-date techy references throughout.

Perhaps the author maintains a vague setting to allow him more plot and character freedom. Discuss how this might work with the students.

Writing style

Don’t assume that your students will all be familiar with the graphic (or semi-graphic) novel as a genre. While many will be very familiar with the suspension of logical believe, the acceptance of unusual plot links, the fast pace and the character stereotyping that comics/graphic novels rely on you will still need to teach these concepts. Most school libraries will have a good range of the more popular graphic novels, and works such as ‘The Dark Knight Returns’ by Art Miller and Klaus Janson can be used to reinforce how this genre works. It is important to emphasise that the genre isn’t a ‘soft option’ for those who have difficulty getting through a whole written novel. Having said that though, graphic novels have been a great stepping-stone to more conventional reading for many students.

Deadhead fits the genre well as the writing style is very descriptive and the plot moves at a furious pace. Even though there are relatively few graphics in the novel, the whole work is ‘comic’ in pace and explosive action. The pace of the novel is aided by the frequent use of short, snappy sentences. The prologue opens with ‘The rain fell hard’ and chapter one opens with ‘It was a good night for grave robbing’. This style of writing is not exclusive for teens of course, as a look at any of Lee Child’s Jack Reacher novels will attest. The more astute students will be aware of the tongue-in-cheek, self-deprecating nature of the story and the many humorous references to important works such as ‘Frankenstein’, ‘Dawn of the Dead’, ‘Shaun of the Dead’ and TV’s ‘Six Million Dollar Man’.

Year level suitability and application

The novel would be suitable for both junior and senior students and given the strong female leads would suit girls equally well as boys. Year nine and ten students would enjoy the novel as a page turning fast read, but seniors could use it as a stylistic exercise and a stepping-stone to writing/drawing their own examples of the genre.

Given the limited amount of graphics there is no reason why it could not be used as Level 1 NCEA written text, either as a straight character/theme type text or by brighter students, as a genre/stylistic text focusing on how readers can be positioned and manipulated by language and graphics of this nature.

Characters

Books of this nature unashamedly deal in character stereotypes and this should be taken on board by students. The main baddies are relentlessly bad, the lower level cops are brave and hardworking, unlike several nameless superiors in the department who have ‘sold their souls’ to the bribery devil, and the young heroes are always brave and resourceful.

Learning opportunities

Before reading: Setting the scene

Reading the cover for visual/verbal clues:

- Students work in pairs to study the verbal and visual clues given by front and back cover of the book. They make a set of predictions on plot, character and setting based on those clues alone. Younger students will need specific coaching in this skill.
- While doing this, students can also make a list of statement that identify how they are being ‘positioned’ by use of of colour, contrast, images, layout, font style.

Prior knowledge discussion / activities:

- Students share their reading/viewing of graphic novels and comics.
- Take students to the school library or organise a trip to a public library near the school, where students spend a period exploring a variety of graphic novels. Students make lists of similarities/difference in the works.
- Get students to share any experiences they have of facing and overcoming challenges in the ‘minefield’ of friendship loyalties/problems and with bullying in the school and the community. This needs to be handled with tact, as some students are likely to be in similar friendship and/or bullying issues as the characters in the story.

During reading:

Prologue:

1. What stereotypical 'baddie' tropes are introduced with the three bad men?
2. What is the smartest thing the policeman does in the prologue?

Chapter one:

3. Explain the irony of Regan's opening statement.
4. In what ways is Spencer a survivor?
5. Give two examples of his very sharp intelligence.

Chapter two:

6. In what ways are Spencer and Regan kindred spirits?
7. What do you think of Spencer's plan to dig up the dead policeman?
8. What famous fictional monster creation is the writer referencing here?

Chapter three:

9. In what ways is Cadence presented to us as a capable policewoman?
10. Why is her entry to the boatshed on flimsy legal ground?

Chapter four:

11. Why is Spencer so proud of his mum?
12. What clues are there that Regan might want her and Spencer to be more than just friends?
13. What do you think is the funniest thing during the practice session?

Chapter five:

14. In what ways is this a bad night for the new Yakusa gang?
15. Why does Carl have a grudging respect for Regan?

Chapter six:

16. What information early in this chapter tells us a bit more about the world these characters inhabit?
17. What rumours are there about the Undertaker?

Chapter seven:

18. Who do you think is more at risk — Rek or the man who brought the message?
19. Why are the bikers unconcerned at the police station?

Chapter eight:

20. What is one positive and one negative about Spencer getting the better of Carl?
21. Have a guess at what is happening to Garret at the end of the chapter?

Chapter nine:

22. Well done if you guessed 'coming back to life', but how was this made possible?

Chapter ten:

23. Describe the state of mind of the newly 'alive' policeman.

Chapter eleven:

24. Explain the practical and moral dilemmas the friends are facing.
25. What deal do the two shake on?

Chapter twelve:

26. Did you expect Cadence's reaction?

Chapter thirteen:

27. What similar circumstance bond Regan and Cadence?

Chapter fourteen:

28. In what ways does Carl impress Jin?

Chapter fifteen:

29. Describe how Cadence deals to each man.

Chapter sixteen:

30. Would any of these weapons be legal in New Zealand?

Chapter seventeen:

31. How does Regan avoid detection?

Chapter eighteen:

32. What does Cadence do (or not do) that impresses her captors?
33. Who do you think has arrived at the Undertaker's headquarters?

Chapter nineteen:

34. What mastermind plan does the Undertaker have in mind?

Chapter twenty:

35. What is the main reason Spencer finds it hard to get rid of Garret?
36. Should Garret have given in to their request so easily?

Chapter twenty-one:

37. In what ways is the Yakuza gang different from the Undertaker's gang?
38. How is tension released at the end of this chapter?

Chapter twenty-two:

39. What is the main thing angering Carl?
40. What potential does the Undertaker see in Carl?

Chapter twenty-three:

41. Make an inventory of the invading force's weapons.
42. How do you think the Undertaker knew of their plans?

Chapter twenty-four:

43. What do you think of the Undertaker's plan for Spencer and his family?

Chapter twenty-five:

44. Did you have a feeling that Yek was a Yakuza spy?

Chapter twenty-six:

45. Who are the heroes of this chapter?

Chapter twenty-seven:

46. How does Regan bring Spencer to his senses?

Chapter twenty-eight:

47. The Undertaker does have some good lines. Quote an insightful statement he makes to do with love and friendship?

Epilogue:

48. Comment on the last sentence.

Post-reading: Taking it further

Theme analysis:

Activity one: Group work activity

Select two of the themes / issues listed earlier in these notes and get students to elaborate more on what the author may be commenting on and how he may be positioning them to think about these issues. When considering the 'how' aspect students will need to closely consider character presentation and the visual aids throughout.

A group spokesperson reports findings to the class.

Activity two: Individual work – longer paragraph answers.

- Describe at least one challenge faced by a character in the written text and explain how this challenge helped you understand the character.
- Describe at least one idea that changed or helped develop your perspective or point of view in the written text. Explain how this idea changed or helped develop your perspective.
- Describe a key moment in the written text that surprised or shocked you. Explain how this moment was important to the text as a whole.
- Describe a character that you disliked or admired in the written text. Explain how your feeling towards this character helped you understand the text as a whole.
- Create a five frame graphic comic strip. Students unfamiliar with the genre or lacking confidence could use the following format:
Frame one – status quo situation, eg walking in school gates
Frame two – problem occurs, eg bully demands your lunch
Frame three – plan to deal with problem, eg put chillies in next lunch
Frame four – dealing with the problem, eg bully eats fire-hot chillies
Frame five – resolution of problem, eg bully never hassles you again

Role play activities: (all role plays need to be handled with sensitivity and closely monitored by the teacher)

- Monologue – adopt the role Spencer, Regan, Cadence or Garret and speaking in character explain your relationship with another character. Discuss how the relationship evolves.
- Monologue - Speaking as same character one year in the future reflect on the events of a year ago and comment on how they have helped make you the person you are now.

Beyond the text activities:

- Get students to research the work of a major graphic artist, eg Neil Gaiman, and produce a slide show that tracks the artist's early years right through to the present.
- Organise a class debate on one or both of the following moots:
“That New Zealand high school English Departments should not encourage students to read graphic novels”
“That graphic novels and comics are detrimental to students' written text reading development.”