

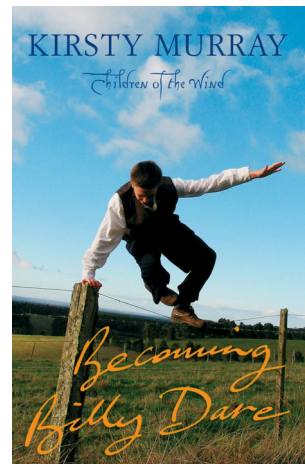
Teachers' Notes (Secondary) by Hamish Curry Becoming Billy Dare Kirsty Murray

ISBN 1865087351

Recommended for ages 10-14

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INTRODUCTION TO THE CHILDREN OF THE WIND SERIES

The *Children of the Wind* quartet is made up of four inter-linked novels for 10- to 14-year-olds, dealing with the lives of three Irish child immigrants to Australia and a modern Australian girl of mixed Chinese/Irish heritage.

<i>Bridie's Fire</i>	1848 - 1852	Published 2003
<i>Becoming Billy Dare</i>	1896 - 1899	Published 2004
<i>A Prayer for Blue Delaney</i>	1954 - 1956	Published 2005
<i>The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong</i>	2003 - 2005	Published 2006

The central child character of each story becomes the adult mentor of the child in the succeeding book. The sweep of time covered, and the buffeting of the winds of change, allow Murray to take in and link numerous themes beyond that of the Irish contribution to Australia:

The lost child/parent	Australian theatre tradition	Refugees
Working children	Organised child migration schemes	Families - natural and made
Immigration	Servant life	Economic migration and the globalised workplace
Poverty and survival	'Belonging' in an immigrant nation	
Change and continuity	Mixed heritage - choosing our identity	
The search for identity		
The child moulding her own destiny		

Settings include: Colonial Melbourne (Toorak and turn of the century Fitzroy), Victorian gold fields, rural NSW, Fremantle, the deserts of Western Australia and South Australia, the Dingo Fence, the Northern Territory, the Melbourne Olympic Games, Ireland, Hong Kong.

INTRODUCTION

The following are educational activities and suggestions to facilitate secondary school courses in Humanities and English (and Drama) as part of the study of *Becoming Billy Dare* (1898 – 1902). The novel uses many facts and historical references and a variety of Australian locations and intertwines these with examples of famous poets and stage plays.

PLOT SUMMARY

"I dare do all that may become a man, who dares do more is none." p.219

It is the 1890s, Paddy Delaney (13 years old) is on a train leaving the Burren in County Clare to fulfil his mother's wishes to study in Dublin to become a priest and be a missionary in Africa. In Dublin, he visits his stern Uncle Kevin and kind Aunt Lil while boarding at St Columcille's College to study. It is at the College that Paddy begins to demonstrate his gift for reciting poetry and acting. However, not all goes to plan. Following the deaths of those he loves most, and feeling he has lost the trust of Uncle Kevin, Paddy decides to leave Ireland behind.

He tries to get on a ship bound for Africa, but ends up stowing away on the *Lapwing*, which is headed for Australia but is shipwrecked. Paddy is shipped to Queenscliff, then on to the Seamen's Home in Melbourne. Now Paddy's adventures in Australia begin. After joining a circus, Paddy travels with it for a time before fleeing its brutal life. He and his companion find work with shearers but leave the sheep station to pursue an opportunity to go on the stage. Failing in this at first, Paddy is reduced to living on the streets and stealing until a kind lady, Bridie Whiteley, takes him in.

Bridie's and Paddy's lives now converge around the three themes of the theatre, family and identity. Those who followed Bridie's adventures as a young orphaned immigrant in *Bridie's Fire* will now have the satisfaction of discovering what she made of her new life and whether she ever did see her beloved brother Brandon again.

Paddy eventually succeeds in the theatre and takes the stage name 'Billy Dare'. He is now in a position to make choices about his future, rather than simply being blown by the wind of chance; this is a daunting but exciting realisation. Through his own attachments and what he sees of Bridie's 'family', Paddy is also developing an understanding of 'the ties that bind'. Paddy, now Billy Dare, is starting to find the self-acceptance he has been searching for ever since leaving Ireland.

STUDIES OF SOCIETY & ENVIRONMENT

Throughout *Becoming Billy Dare*, there are many references to real people, places and events. These could form part of a study of Irish and Australian history through the lens of literature.

EVIDENCE-BASED TRACKING AND MAPPING

"One day he was shipwrecked on a white beach, the next he was lost on the streets of a city and now he was travelling an endless open road."

Paddy Delaney has many adventures throughout the novel. This involves him travelling great distances, and enduring different kinds of environments.

- Track Paddy's different 'journeys' in the novel, not only mapping these and making hypotheses about possible routes (based on the descriptions in the novel) but also indicating the conditions and environment at different stages.
- Students can use symbols to illustrate the conditions, or insert the relevant page numbers (from the novel) describing the conditions and environment at different points on Paddy's journeys.
- It may work well to work in teams for this activity, or even run a competition to see which team can track Paddy the most accurately.
- This could lead into a class debate, with evidence and counter-arguments; an essential part of any historical study.

Some of the maps would involve:

- Tracking the path of the *Lapwing*, from its departure in Dublin across the ocean, to its demise at Point Nepean (see Chapter 11).

- Tracking Paddy's path from the shipwreck to Melbourne (pp. 82 – 85).
- Tracking the path of Sears' Circus (pp. 94 – 100).
- Tracking Paddy and Violet's escape from the Circus, ending up at Gonyah Station with the shearers, and then their train trip back to Melbourne (pp. 117 – 139).
- Tracking Paddy's involvement with Bowman's theatre troupe, performing *Lightning Jack* (pp. 196 – 218)

RELIGION AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

Becoming Billy Dare involves the concepts of change and belonging. These concepts often result in attitudes and beliefs being challenged and reconciled. This is sometimes through pressure, and at other times through force or violence.

Chapter 3 in the novel describes life at St Columcille's College. There are many stark comparisons and contrasts with education as it is today.

- Students should evaluate the reasoning behind this style of education and compare it with their own. A further element of evaluation would be added if the students' school were of a particular denomination. Thus, students can look at the following question:
 - How has education and indeed religious education evolved?
 - After some research, this could lead into a debate or role-play demonstrating the kind of punishments for different kinds of student infringements.
 - Find out what a 'soutane' is – or find a pictorial example.
- At the beginning of the novel, religion is very important to Paddy. He proudly imagines himself becoming a famous and influential priest.
 - What were his aspirations as a priest? How long would it have taken him to reach this goal?
 - What were some of his religious routines at St Columcille's?
- Religion is also important to a number of characters around Dublin. Explain how Uncle Kevin, Aunt Lil, Father O'Keefe and the Dohertys view religion in their lives.
 - Why do you think Paddy becomes disillusioned?
- There are references to famous Irish people such as Dan O'Connell and Parnell. Find out what made them famous and decide whether they were 'great men'.

- Life in Australia is confronting for Paddy. He experiences many intriguing and scary moments. They are all based on fact and there are remnants of these around today.
 - Paddy sees Aboriginals at different times during his stay at Gunyah Station (on pp. 127 and 136), and some things seem odd to him. What are they? Explain the concepts behind them? (i.e. What was the attitude towards Aboriginals at that time?)
 - Life as a shearer was very hard and hot work. Read through pp. 129 – 130. Students should then either identify the different jobs at Gunyah Station, or write a job description (including difficulties) for one of these jobs.
 - Use visuals from the period to stimulate discussion about the life of a shearer. There are some excellent paintings by Tom Roberts (such as *The Golden Fleece* and *Shearing the Rams*), which were painted in the 1890s.
- The Depression that hit Melbourne in the early 1890s was a huge contrast to the boom of previous years. Looking at the concept of 'boom and bust', discuss the changes in attitude and lifestyle for many Melburnians in the 1890s. (See the links on pp. 166 and 185.)
- This also ties in very well with the theme of 'identity', in which Paddy's challenges mirror the challenges facing Australia and the world towards the end of the 19th century. Highlighting some major events and characteristics of the world during the 1890s would help students to place this in context, and would also assist their study of this theme in English.

"The whole world was changing shape around him." p. 56

ENGLISH

WINDS OF CHANGE AND CHOICE

Dealing with change, making choices, and reflecting on the past are prominent in *Becoming Billy Dare*. It is ironic that a boy with such a good memory for poems and play scripts should spend so much time trying to forget the past. He is also struggling for identity, changing his name from Paddy Delaney to Billy Smith and finally to Billy Dare. These themes were also important in the first novel of this series, *Bridie's Fire*. Both Paddy and Bridie come to appreciate the power of hindsight.

- The very first lines of the novel discuss the cold wind and Paddy taking on a 'dare' from his friend Mick. What are some of the connections here with the themes of challenges and courage?

- The wind also makes its presence felt at a number of stages (pp. 9, 44, 46, 64, 77, 169). What is occurring during the novel when the wind is mentioned? What trends do you observe?
- On page 66, Paddy laments, "...even the wind had a voice." This description connects closely with the themes of change and the past. Explain the links with Paddy's conscience and his resolve.

For Paddy, his past is riddled with adversity and pessimism. This means that throughout the novel, Paddy is struggling to confront and accept his past. It's almost as if he carries a lot of regret about the choices he has made.

- Students should choose one of the following quotes from the novel and write a letter to Paddy, advising him about how to overcome his anxiety with the past. In the letter, students should make specific references to some of Paddy's experiences to help him understand and appreciate the changes and choices he has made.
 - "...the dark and miserable past. Paddy couldn't bear to dwell on it, not even for a moment." p.95
 - "The past was a dark place that he didn't want to visit, not even in a letter." p.134
 - "No Violet. He shut his eyes, trying to drive away the thought of her." p.159
 - "I can't be living in the past." p.165
 - "It hurts to remember." p.165
 - "It feels like fire, like everything's burnt and black." p.165
 - "...the memory [of Dai and the Lapwing] caught him off guard. He still couldn't think of the past without the darkness threatening to swallow him." p.208

Bridie has a very different approach to the past. She has learnt to embrace her choices and experiences and understands the value of hindsight. For example, she says, "*The past is always living in you and it's only lost if you won't remember it.*" (p.165). Also read p. 237.

- Ask students to reflect on something in their past. Have them relate their experience to the common phrase: 'Hindsight is a wonderful thing'. What does this mean to students? How does hindsight help us to put the past into perspective, and what impact does it have on our choices for the future?

Towards the end of the novel (p. 237), Bridie tells Paddy: "*The memories that you store up in a place, they're as precious as gold.*"

- In groups, decide what memories Paddy would choose as his three most precious. Then have groups compare their 'top 3' memories and decide on the top 1. Have the groups explain their choices.

BELONGING

Paddy (Billy Dare) comes to accept and embrace his 'journey', but it is assisted through his passion and talents for acting and poetry. At first he was quite pessimistic and lacked faith in his future, but as he realised his potential and his independence, Paddy became more outspoken and forthright. As Paddy acquires his appreciation of belonging, he becomes more mature: it is also reassuring to see that Bridie's perseverance results in her finally being able to have a place she can call home. Thematically, this echoes Australia transforming from a small colony into a unified, organised nation – and this would allow some good inter-disciplinary activities with Humanities.

- Paddy lacks faith in his future and wants to escape. Compare the following quotes, and identify what experiences had changed Paddy's attitude.
 - "*It was like looking in a long, dark tunnel and praying that there truly would be some light at the end.*" p. 11
 - "*Paddy shut his eyes and wished he really was a dove with wings, that could lift him to the sky and take him far away from the weight of everyone's hopes and expectations*" p. 27
 - "*Not a priest, nor a soldier, nobody's son, nobody's kin – nothing but a Jonah.*" p. 81
 - "*He wasn't sure where his future lay, his faith, his hopes and dreams were all caught up in a whirlwind of impossible longings and confusing possibilities.*" p. 238
- Write up some possible career pathways for Paddy. Where could some of his choices lead him? These pathways should have clear reasoning behind them, based on your understanding of Paddy's character and his abilities.
- How does the relationship with Violet help Paddy to come to terms with his own sense of responsibility? Consider how protective he becomes of her throughout their experiences.

Acting plays a big role in changing Paddy into Billy, and changing identities:

"He was transformed from a boy to a bushranger." p. 213

"It was if he had shed his past, sloughed it off like an old skin" p. 215

- Have students choose and role-play a scene from the novel; this could be co-ordinated with a Drama activity, using a stage and costumes. Ask students about the qualities needed to make it convincing (i.e. confidence, a good memory, passion).
- Have students debate the extent to which changing identities was just another way for Paddy to 'erase' his past and start a new life.

Paddy begins to feel a sense of connection towards the end of the novel: *"When had it happened? – That moment when he realised he belonged in this landscape?"* p. 218

- Have students design their own 'love spoon' (read pp. 73 and 251), with their own symbols signifying belonging.
- Have students look at the references to poems from Yeats and Henry Lawson. Compare the functions of poems as stories and as insights into love, despair, and other emotions.
- With this awareness, students should choose one of the chapter titles of the novel and use this as the inspiration for their own poem (eg. Chapter 23, 'Fire and Gold', has clear links with Bridie and Paddy). The poem should either 'tell a tale' or 'tug at the heart'.

MEET THE WRITERS

KIRSTY MURRAY

Kirsty Murray has written 3 junior fiction novels: *Zarconi's Magic Flying Fish* (Allen & Unwin, 1999), *Market Blues* (Allen & Unwin, 2001) and *Walking Home with Marie Claire* (Allen & Unwin, 2002) as well as several non-fiction titles. *Becoming Billy Dare* is the second book in her series 'Children of the Wind'. The first book was *Bridie's Fire*.

To find out more about the author, go to www.allen-unwin.com.au/Authors/apMurray.asp and www.kirstymurray.com

Kirsty Murray says: "I hope to empower children with a sense of the significance of their own personal role in history ... I believe the dearth of Australian historical fiction for children compounds the problem of kids perceiving Australian history as essentially boring. For a nation of immigrants to gain a strong sense of identity we need narratives that we can relate to, set in landscapes with which we can identify ... Stories that deal with the immigrant experience, with the struggle to adapt

to a chaotic new world are particularly relevant to contemporary children, living in a world of rapid change, a world where they will be obliged to reinvent themselves many times over."

HAMISH CURRY

Hamish Curry is the City Campus Co-ordinator of Eltham College of Education, Melbourne.