**Bluefish**

By: Pat Schmatz
 ISBN: 9780763653347
 Hardback
 Nov 2011
 ARRP: \$24.95
 NZRRP: \$27.99
 No. of Pages: 240

Learning Areas:

English

Questions for:

Secondary

Themes:

- Illiteracy
- Friendship
- Alcoholism
- Death & grieving
- Bullying
- Adolescence & identity

Age Range:

14+yrs

Genre:

YA fiction

Bluefish - Synopsis

Thirteen-year-old Travis is missing his old home in the country, and he's missing his old dog, Rosco. Now there's just the cramped place he shares with his well-meaning but alcoholic grandpa, a new school and the dreaded routine of passing when he's called on to read out loud. But that's before Travis meets Mr McQueen, who doesn't take "pass" for an answer – a rare teacher whose savvy persistence has Travis slowly unlocking a book on the natural world. And it's before Travis is noticed by Velveeta, a girl whose wry banter and colourful scarves belie some hard secrets of her own. With sympathy, humour, and disarming honesty, Pat Schmatz brings to life a cast of utterly believable characters – and captures the moments of trust and connection that make all the difference in life.

Bluefish was the recipient of the 2010 PEN/Phyllis Naylor Working Writer Fellowship – PEN American Centre.

"Bluefish hooks the reader from the first page with a voice that is fresh, captivating, and assured, and characters that compel us as often with their silences as with their words. Schmatz's language is imaginative and direct, with pitch-perfect turns of phrase. This is a story of ordinary lives that packs tremendous emotional wallop without a shred of sentimentality." – PEN judges

About Pat Schmatz

Pat Schmatz (pronounced "Schmotz") grew up in America in rural Wisconsin. Her passions as a child were reading, basketball and nature and the outdoors. She lived in various parts of America including Michigan, California and Minnesota, before settling again in Wisconsin.

Pat is an enthusiastic traveller, who has visited such diverse destinations as Canada, Japan and New Zealand. She has a strong sense of social justice, and when she's not travelling, does administrative work for the Legal Aid Society of Minneapolis which provides free legal services for low-income earners and people with disabilities. In the summer, she is on the staff of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival.

In-between, when she's not running or skiing in the woods or swimming in the lake, she studies Spanish and Japanese, watches American football and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and reads and re-reads and writes and rewrites.

More information can be found about Pat at her website, www.patschmatz.com, or her blog, www.patschmatz.livejournal.com.

A letter from Pat Schmatz

"Dear Reader,

Travis Roberts has a secret. Velveeta Wojciehowski is good at ferreting out secrets – and she has a few of her own.

I started off writing this book about Travis. He loves the woods and the swamp the same way I do – he lives and breathes for a glimpse of a great blue heron swooping overhead or an early-morning flash of a red fox slipping through the underbrush. He hates school. He hates the walls and the ceilings, and the noise and teachers and books, and the windows that separate him from the sky outside. On his first day of eighth grade, a shoe flies across the crowded hallway and lands in front of him. Travis makes a decision about that shoe, and Velveeta sees what he does, and that starts everything.

Once Velveeta stepped into the story, every idea I had about where we were going took a left turn. She changed things up so much and so often that she left Travis and me in a head-spun gawk. As I tried to get control of the story back from Velveeta, I played secret librarian and slipped a couple of my favourite books into the mix – *Haunt Fox* by Jim Kjelgaard and *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. In the hands of Travis and Velveeta, those books took on a new life and made me love them even more.

I hope you have as good a time with Travis and Velveeta as I have. I hope they help you make a sideways step or two on the road of what you think is possible. We walk around thinking we know what's going to happen next – but really, anything can happen at any time. Especially when someone starts digging into your secrets ... and you let them.

Enjoy!"

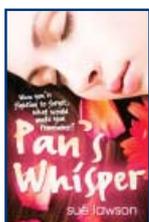


Discussion Questions

- How realistic do you find the characters in the novel? Think particularly about the weaknesses and frailties they exhibit. For instance, Travis's hot temper and Bradley's propensity to be victimised. Do you find these qualities make it easier or harder for you to identify with them? Do they come across as complex, nuanced and "human", or flawed and unlikeable as a result?
- The "bluefish" operates as a symbol or motif in the novel. What does it represent at the start of the novel? How has its meaning changed for Travis by the end of the book? Find quotes to support your answer.
- Travis, Velveeta and Bradley can all be considered outsiders. What are some of the signs that mark them as outsiders? Does being an outsider necessarily equate to being unpopular at school, or is it more complex than that? To what extent do you feel each character chooses to isolate themselves from others, and to what extent is this position thrust upon them? How instrumental is this outsider status to the development of their friendship?
- Discuss the various places the characters find refuge in the novel. For instance, the woods, Calvin's caravan and the library. How do these places help the characters cope with change and adversity?
- Analyse the significance of Velveeta's scarves. What do they represent to her? Why is she so upset when she no longer has access to them? Can you draw any parallels between Velveeta's scarves and Travis's old dog, Rosco? Think particularly about their role in helping the characters come to terms with loss.
- How are the roles of parent/guardian and child inverted in relation to Travis and his Grandpa, and Velveeta and her mother? To what extent can the adults in these relationships be seen as negligent carers or poor role models? Are there any other adults in the book who behave in an irresponsible or childish manner? What do you think the author's attitude is towards them? Does she judge them or empathise with them? How has their behaviour helped shape Travis's and Velveeta's characters, in both a positive and negative sense?
- Discuss the roles of Mr McQueen and Connie in the novel. To what extent do they act as parent substitutes for Travis and Velveeta? What are some of the qualities that make McQueen a good teacher and Connie a good librarian?

Activities

- Draw a character web graphically depicting the relationships between the various characters in the novel. Write each of the main characters' names on a large sheet of paper, leaving as much space around them as possible. Around each name write:
 - a description of the character (age, appearance, family background, job, skills, interests, etc.)
 - adjectives to describe their personality
 - quotes from the book which give insight into their character. (Make sure you use quotation marks.)
 Draw lines to connect each of the characters who have a relationship in the book, and along these lines, write a brief explanation of their relationship.
- Read the following article about adult literacy levels from *The Age*: "You wouldn't read about it"; <http://www.theage.com.au/national/you-wouldnt-read-about-it-20100508-ul30.html> How do the issues and experiences discussed in this article give insight into Travis's character?
- Research teen/adult illiteracy on the internet. Statistically, how many people are affected by this issue in Australia as compared to the USA, where *Bluefish* is set? What about other parts of the world? What are some of the implications for adults with low literacy levels? What support services are available? Present your findings as a pamphlet designed to be handed out at community centres. Think carefully about the intended audience of your pamphlet and how you can use language and visual techniques to engage them most effectively.
- Write an additional chapter to the novel, focusing particularly on the characters' relationships and interactions. Try to write in a similar style to Pat Schmatz.
- A number of novels are alluded to in *Bluefish*; most frequently, *Haunt Fox* by Jim Kjelgaard, the book Travis learns to read with, and *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, which Velveeta reads. Read one of these books and explain why Schmatz may have decided to incorporate it into the novel. In particular, consider how it helps illuminate particular characters, themes or aspects of the plot.
- Imagine that the publishers were not happy with the title *Bluefish* and had asked you to come up with an alternate title for the book. Choose a title which conveys your understanding of the book's themes, characters or mood, then design a new book jacket featuring this title. Think particularly about how you can use visual techniques such as colour, font, framing, composition and symbols to emphasise your key ideas.

If you enjoyed *Bluefish*, you might also like these thoughtful YA novels ...***Pan's Whisper***

By: Sue Lawson
ISBN: 9781742032061
RRP: AU\$18.95/NZ\$21.99

Ordered into foster care, Pan is full of anger at her mother and older sister. She is certain that she knows the truth of her past – until she meets Hunter, who may be the key to unlocking her memories.

***The Sky is Everywhere***

By: Jandy Nelson
ISBN: 9781406326307
RRP: AU\$24.95/NZ \$31.99

Seventeen-year-old Lennie Walker spends her time tucked safely in the shadow of her older sister, Bailey. But when Bailey dies abruptly, everything changes.

***Letters to Leonardo***

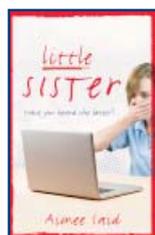
By: Dee White
ISBN: 9781921150883
RRP: AU\$16.95/NZ \$18.99

A unique and powerful story about a fifteen-year-old boy who tries to deal with his mother's mental illness by writing letters to Leonardo da Vinci.

***Chasing Boys***

By: Karen Tayleur
ISBN: 9781921167607
RRP: AU\$16.99/NZ\$18.99

When Ariel Marini started school, her mum's advice was, "Mind your manners, listen to your teacher and don't chase boys". And then life got complicated.

***Little Sister***

By: Aimee Said
ISBN: 9781921529214
RRP: AU\$16.95/NZ \$19.99

Al is tired of living in the shadow of her perfect older sister, Larrie. But when rumours about Larrie start to circulate at school, Al finds herself in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons.

***Violence 101***

By: Denis Wright
ISBN: 9781742031781
RRP: AU\$16.99/NZ\$18.99

My name is Hamish Graham and this is the journal I have to write ... It is obvious why I am here. I am here because sometimes I do very violent things and I'm too young to be put in jail.

For information about new releases, the latest awards news and links to a range of teacher resources, sign up to our education newsletter at www.walkerbooks.com.au/Teachers