

## These notes are for:

- Secondary – years 9-10
- Secondary – years 11-12

## Key Learning Areas:

- English
- Modern History
- ICT

## Example of:

- Novel
- YA Fiction
- Bildungsroman

## Style and Techniques:

- Non-chronological structure
- Parallel narratives
- Multiple perspectives
- Symbolism and motifs
- Imagery
- Intertextuality & allusion
- Unreliable narrator

## Themes:

- Identity
- Family & family heritage
- History & memory
- Modern History: WWI, Cuban Missile Crisis, the attack on the Twin Towers
- Relationships
- Coming of age
- Social class

\*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

Walker Books Australia      Ph +61 2 9517 9577  
 Locked Bag 22                      Fax +61 2 9517 9997  
 Newtown, N.S.W., 2042

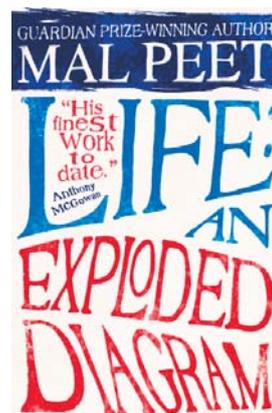
These notes were created by Leonie Jordan.  
 For enquiries please contact Leonie Jordan:  
[leonie.jordan@walkerbooks.com.au](mailto:leonie.jordan@walkerbooks.com.au)

Notes © 2011 Walker Books Australia Pty. Ltd.  
 All Rights Reserved

## Life: An Exploded Diagram

### Life: An Exploded Diagram

Author: Mal Peet  
 ISBN: 9781844281008  
 ARRP: \$18.95  
 NZRRP: \$21.99  
 Pages: 416  
 August 2011



## Synopsis

*Life: An Exploded Diagram* is a brilliant coming-of-age story set against the backdrop of the Cold War and Cuban Missile Crisis.

Clem Ackroyd lives with his parents and grandmother in a claustrophobic home too small to accommodate their larger-than-life characters in the bleak Norfolk countryside. Clem's life changes irrevocably when he meets Frankie, the daughter of a wealthy farmer, and experiences first love, in all its pain and glory. The story is told in flashback by Clem when he is living and working in New York City as a designer, and moves from the past of his parents and grandmother to his own teenage years.

This sophisticated novel would be an ideal close-study text for Years 10-12, with its resonant themes and distinctive literary style. Set against the backdrop of global politics, it has clear links to the Modern History curriculum and is also a perfect supplementary text for the NSW HSC Extension English I Module, "After the Bomb". With strong parallels established between the political and personal, it could be used to explore the role family and political/social context play in shaping identity, as well as to critique literary devices such as foreshadowing, symbolism/motifs and the unreliable narrator.

See the book trailer for *Life* on the Walker website:

[www.walkerbooks.com.au/Books/Life-An-Exploded-Diagram-9781844281008](http://www.walkerbooks.com.au/Books/Life-An-Exploded-Diagram-9781844281008)

## Author Information

Mal Peet is a writer of exceptional talent who has established himself as a strong and distinctive voice in young adult fiction. His novels include *Keeper* and its sequel, *The Penalty*, which are set in South America and deal with themes of sport, the supernatural, poverty and corruption. *Tamar*, an absorbing story of the Dutch resistance during WWII, was winner of the 2005 Carnegie Medal. Peet also won the 2009 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize for *Exposure*, a modern retelling of Shakespeare's *Othello*. He has collaborated with his wife, Elspeth Graham, on *Cloud Tea Monkeys*, a modern folktale set in India which was short-listed for the 2011 Kate Greenaway Award. Overall, Peet's novels are distinguished by their refusal to be constrained by traditional categories or to preach to younger readers, with Peet stating that he is sceptical of books written specifically for teenagers, saying they are prone to being condescending. Peet lives in Devon with his family.

## How To Use These Notes

These notes provide a variety of discussion questions and activities that can be used with *Life*. Please select according to the level, learning style and targeted outcomes of your students.

## Mal Peet on *Life: An Exploded Diagram*

“A while ago I was thinking, in my cheerful way, about nuclear weapons. In particular, about the fact that we don’t talk about them much any more. We’ve transferred our survival anxieties onto climate change, international terrorism, overpopulation. Still, the fact is that there are – at the very least – some seven thousand nuclear warheads stashed around the planet. More than enough to blow it off its orbit.

At around the same time, I happened to be looking through some old photos that had belonged to my mother. One was of a little boy, three years old or so, sitting in a new pedal car. He’d been smartened up for the camera and looks pretty cheesed off about it. It took me a minute or so to realise that he was me. Or, rather, that I had once been him.

In 1962, when he and I were the same teenager, the world suddenly seemed to be on the brink of all-out nuclear war. I was extremely annoyed about it at the time. It didn’t seem at all fair that I’d be turned into radioactive ash before my life had really got going. There were things I wanted to do before I died. Several of these things involved girls.

Then it occurred to me that explosions – real or feared – had played a significant part in my life.

I’d never before wanted to write anything autobiographical. I’d always thought that if I did I’d feel pressured to tell the truth, and not know how to. Besides, my memory isn’t what it was.

So I invented Clem Ackroyd and told his story instead.

The novel has a long timeline. The whole of the 20th century and a bit more, in fact. But the core of the story is the summer and autumn of 1962. Seventeen year-old Clem is conducting a feverish love affair with sixteen-year-old Francoise Mortimer. There are all sorts of reasons why he shouldn’t be. He’s a working-class boy from a council estate; she’s the only daughter of an enormously wealthy landowner who also happens to be Clem’s father’s employer. His parents, Ruth and George, and his Bible-thumping grandmother, Win, share a morbid fear of anything to do with sex. Her parents are ferocious snobs. Clem’s family are Protestant, hers Roman Catholic. So Frankie and Clem are constantly searching for secret places to be together and in constant fear of being discovered. They do eventually find a safe and private place; but soon afterwards, US President John F. Kennedy goes on TV and announces that he’s discovered the Soviet Union has installed nuclear missiles on Cuba, and he won’t stand for it. Over the following two weeks, Russia and America edge towards the ultimate war. Clem and Frankie feel an urgent need to Go All the Way before the world does and are hurried towards their fate.

Clem Ackroyd isn’t me; his family, his school, his life aren’t mine. But as I worked on the novel I couldn’t help noticing some striking resemblances. Mostly, though, I managed to avoid the truth. I was worried that the shades of my mother, father, and grandmother – not to mention Frankie – might be reading over my shoulder.”

From “Undercover” blog, <http://www.undercoverreads.com/2011/06/mal-peet-introduces-life-exploded.html>



## Reviews of *Life: An Exploded Diagram*

“Surely the finest young adult book of the year ... This story has indignation, passion and humour, always expressed with an exhilarating choice of words.” *The Sunday Times*

“Peet handles this complex narrative with such confidence and skill that the journey is almost seamless, and the darkness of the subject matter is offset by a dry and clever wit ... It’s a book for older and committed teenage readers or adults of any age – quality writing at this level defies an age-range.” *The Daily Mail*

“With *Life: An Exploded Diagram*, Peet has once more produced a winner: a subtle, minutely observed novel with a huge heart and a bold historical sweep.” *The Guardian*

“Mal Peet’s humorous narration is sharp in intent but always entertaining ... Use this very accessible and engaging black comedy in years 10 or 11 to contrast with other war fiction, biography or Peet’s own dramatic account of World War II Holland in his earlier novel *Tamar* or as part of an author study.” Ernie Tucker, *Choices in English*

## Discussion Questions

- While Clem is the main character in the book, with the majority of the novel related from his point of view, large sections of the story are also given over to histories of his father, George, his mother Ruth, and his grandmother Winn. Why do you think Peet has chosen to include their stories? How important is family history in shaping a character's identity? In what ways has Clem been shaped by the experiences of his family?
- "It's not easy keeping history in line. Herding cats by fog is easy by comparison." (197) Peet uses a non-chronological narrative structure, which shifts back and forth between the past and present. Why do you think Peet has chosen to use this structure? Think particularly about its role in creating suspense and highlighting the impact of history on the present on both a personal and political level. How does this non-chronological structure relate to the subtitle of the book?
- "Fidel Castro would make a significant contribution to twentieth-century history and to Clem Ackroyd's yet-undreamed-of loss of virginity." (115) The political and the personal are shown as inextricably connected in the novel. What examples can you find to support this? What significance might Clem's name have in terms of illustrating this intersection between the political and the personal?
- "I'm fascinated by the way things fit together (and come to pieces)." (192) The motif of fragmentation underscores the novel, with the three sections of the book entitled "Putting Things Together", "Blowing Things Apart" and "Picking Up the Pieces". How else is this motif evident in the structure and style of the novel? Some ideas to consider include the non-linear structure of the narrative, the myriad of narrative perspectives and the frequent shifts between time frames and narrative voice. How effective do you find this structure in capturing the essence of human existence or "life"? Does the story seem fragmented and fractured in your opinion, or has Peet effectively woven these different elements together to create a cohesive whole?
- The novel opens with Ruth's chimney being shattered by an RAF Spitfire and ends with the attack on the Twin Towers. What other examples can you find of explosions, or potential explosions in the novel? What ideas is Peet trying to convey through this motif?
- "If his parents ... found out that he'd been doing dirty things in the woods with ... Gerard Mortimer's daughter ... It would be like ... He couldn't think of an analogy. A bomb going off, or something." (206) To what extent do the explosions in the novel also operate on a figurative or metaphorical level?
- Discuss the role of the Brethren and Enoch's Doomsday prophecies. While Armageddon does not come on the day he originally predicts, Enoch is not deterred and is later encountered by Clem preaching at the Glastonbury Music Festival. Could Enoch's apocalypse represent an unfulfilled explosion on a global scale – a threat of explosion still hanging over the characters and reader at the end of the book? Or is his prophecy fulfilled in the attack on the Twin Towers? Think particularly about the significance of the final lines of the book:
  - "... we in the streets, the Spared, the Elect, began to shout obscenities and the various names of God." (413)
- Literary allusions and intertextuality underpin the novel, the most prominent example being the Marvell poem, "To His Coy Mistress", which Clem reads to Frankie. Why do you think Peet has included this poem? Think particularly about its significance in relation to Clem and Frankie's relationship. What other literary references can you find in the novel?
- Clem describes his favourite still-life painting, saying "the fruits and the vegetables, those humble and edible objects, have their backs to the void. ... They say, they *insist*, that they briefly exist. ... Death is the default. There's no avoiding it. It's the background into which we will inevitably melt ... But in the meantime, eat, see, smell, taste, listen, touch." (125) Do you think this is how Clem interpreted the painting when he first encountered it as a schoolboy, or is his adult self instead interpreting the painting retrospectively in light of his experiences since then? What resonances can you see between the painting and the Marvell poem which Clem recites? Explore the way that Frankie is often linked with fruit and fruit imagery in the novel. For instance, she is first encountered during the annual strawberry picking. What do you think Peet is trying to say about their relationship through these references?
- What role does art play in the book? Why do you think Clem decides to become an illustrator? Consider in particular his preference for charts and diagrammatic drawings.
- Gerard Mortimer hires George to help him, "modernize the landscape. Straighten it out. Rationalize it. Get it machine-ready. Turn this part of Norfolk into clean prairie." (136) How does Gerard's attitude towards the land reflect his personality in a broader sense? Think particularly about his relationship with his family. What might be the significance of Frankie's ambition to restore Franklins to its former state after the death of her father?
- George doesn't sentimentalise the war, debasing the traditional myths of patriotism and valour by saying, "they'd fought – he'd fought – for sex." (69) How do his experiences of war shape both his identity, work and family life? In what way does George's domestic life represent another "battleground"? Think particularly about the imagery Peet uses when writing from George's point of view. For instance, Winn "lifting a hand to her chest and stumbling as if a sniper had got her." (69)
- While *Life* explores serious, and often disturbing, subjects, and poses some grave questions about the precariousness of human existence, the novel is fundamentally playful – even satiric – in tone. Wordplay, understatement, self-deprecation and a strong sense of the absurd help bring characters and events to life for the reader. Discuss the role humour plays in the novel. What examples can you find? What do these examples reveal about the attitude of the narrator? If Peet had not used this tone, how would your response to the novel have been different?



- “Underneath the cool and the tailored suits and beyond the photo calls, JFK was, physically, a mess. He was ... riddled by disease.” (257) Reality versus illusion is an important theme in *Life*. What examples can you find of this theme? Some ideas could include Clem’s clandestine relationship with Frankie, Ruth’s secret girlhood ritual of putting on make-up and Ruth and George’s pretense at a happy marriage. How might this theme relate to Clem’s comment about art: “I loved, love, the surfaces of things. What things actually look like.” (123) Could the author be suggesting that Clem is to some extent naïve, or taken in by appearances? Could his work as an illustrator constitute a form of deliberate self-deception?
- Clem says, “Nostalgics want to cuddle the past like a puppy. But the past has bloody teeth and bad breath. I look into its mouth like a sorrowing dentist.” (36)

Do you agree with this statement? Is he in fact nostalgic? Does Clem ever sentimentalise the past, or see it through rose-tinted glasses? Think particularly about his affair with Frankie.

- In her review of *Life* in *The Guardian*, Meg Rossoff says, “The question that will undoubtedly be raised in relation to this – and one that has been asked of Peet’s work before – is whether it really belongs in the young adult section.” Would you categorise *Life* as a YA book? Why or why not? Read Peet’s comments about YA literature on the British Literature council website <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/mal-peet>. Do you agree with his comments at all?

## Classroom Activities

### English

- In small groups, brainstorm a list of significant political events that have occurred during your lifetime. Discuss the impact these events have had on your personality, your way of life and your relationship with others. Choose one of these events and write a short story or creative response illustrating its effect on your life. You may like to use a parallel narrative structure similar to that which Peet uses in the book, with one strand of the story focusing on the event and another strand of the story focusing on what was happening in your life at that time. Try to create links between these two plot strands through creative use of imagery, symbolism, foreshadowing, etc.
- Write another chapter to *Life* following on from the end of the novel.
- Compare the story of the Cuban missile crisis as told by Mal Peet with the version presented by the film *Thirteen Days* (Roger Donaldson, 2000, New Line Cinema). How do these accounts differ?

### Science

- In the chapter entitled “DNA”, Clem says of his grandfather Percy, who died before he was born, “He’s woven into my DNA. We share cellular structure. ... He might have some genetic say in the kind of people I’m attracted to. And therefore he might be to blame for my failed marriage.” (38) Do you agree with Clem’s perspective? What role do you think heredity plays in determining identity? To what extent do you feel that your identity has been shaped by your ancestors? Research the “Nature versus Nurture” theory on the internet. What are some of the factors in Clem’s environment or upbringing (“Nurture”) which may also have had an impact on his development?

### Mathematics

- Game theory is a branch of mathematics concerned with decision-making in social interactions. It applies to situations (games) where there are two or more people (called players), each attempting to choose between two or more ways of acting. Discuss the basic principles of game theory as a class. (A basic overview can be found at <http://plus.maths.org/content/os/issue13/features/brams/index>.)

How can game theory help us to understand the interactions between the US and the Soviet Union during the missile crisis?

### History

- Interview a relative or older member of the community who has memories of the Cuban missile crisis. Use your interview as the basis for a feature article about what it was like to live through this period in history.
- Create a time line of key events in the Cold War, starting with the Yalta Agreement in 1945 and ending with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.
- Peet acknowledges the subjective nature of history, admitting “From another angle, through a different lens, each of these men becomes something else.” (256) To what extent can we trust Clem’s account of the Cuban missile crisis? Can he be viewed as a reliable narrator? Research the Cuban missile crisis on the internet. (A useful starting point is the Cuban missile crisis: 40th Anniversary Archive: [http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba\\_mis\\_cri/](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/)) Can you see any discrepancies in Clem’s version of events?
- Compose a series of Tweets which show the development of the Cuban Missile Crisis. You may like to incorporate multiple perspectives by “tweeting” as a variety of historical personages.

### Drama

- Chapter 32, “Hawks, Doves, Dogs”, describes the internal debate Excomm had over how to respond to the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba: a direct attack or a sea blockade. Enact this “Hawks versus Doves” debate as a class, with half of the class lobbying for a direct attack and the other half for a blockade. Spend time preparing your arguments first, paying particular attention to your use of persuasive techniques such as direct appeals, imperatives, inclusive language, rhetorical questions, etc.

Sign up to our FREE education newsletter at:  
[www.walkerbooks.com.au/Teachers](http://www.walkerbooks.com.au/Teachers)