



## THE TRAM to BONDI BEACH

*LIBBY HATHORN*

*Illustrated by JULIE VIVAS*

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Teachers Notes prepared by Dr Pam Macintyre

### **Summary**

Keirin O'Grady's passion is the trams that rattle their way up and down the hills of Bondi during the 1930s in Sydney. Kieran wants to be a paperboy, like Saxon, who is expert at moving along the running-board of the tram, distributing papers and collecting money in the few minutes that it is stationary. When he is nine, Keiran is allowed to become a paperboy, but when he jumps off a moving tram and falls, it looks as though his paper selling days are over. However, Saxon shows he is a true friend, and Mr Francis, the newsagency proprietor, understands boys, Keiran's love of the trams, and saves the day.

This picture book has become a firm favourite, if not an Australian classic, since its publication in 1981. And it is not difficult to see why. It is a beautifully designed artifact from cover to cover, and it evokes in words and pictures, not only the long gone trams, but a past society and way of life.

The first reaction to such a beautiful book should be purely an aesthetic one of enjoying the gentle, evocative images, the subtle colours of an Australian summer, the story of a young boy's passion and determination, friendship, and the kindly adult who understands.

### **Chambers's 'Tell Me' questions**

This is a book which is able to be read and enjoyed by a range of readers, from preps to upper primary, so it is important to allow young readers to respond with their own interpretations. Aidan Chambers's 'Tell Me' questions are useful here in offering readers fruitful ways of thinking, talking and sharing individual and group responses. The following have been selected from the general and special questions as a sample. Others could be used as well as, or instead of:

- When you first saw the book, even before you read it, what kind of book did you think it was going to be?

- Was there anything you liked about this book?
- Was there anything you disliked?
- Was there anything that puzzled you?
- How long did it take the story to happen?
- Where did the story happen?
- When did the story happen?
- When you think about the book now, after all we've said, what is the most important thing about it for you?
- What will you tell your friends about this book?

Aidan Chambers *Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk*. Stroud: The Thimble Press, 1993, pp.88-90.

### **Personal connections**

- Examine closely the page set in Keiran's bedroom. Identify what his possessions are. What do you think he does with his friends for play and relaxation?
- Draw your bedroom and describe what you do with your friends.
- How is your life different from and the same as Keiran's?
- Keiran wants to be the paperboy on the tram but is afraid he won't be able to do it. Do you think we are often scared of what we want to do the most?

### **General discussion**

- Just about every page has groups of people on it. Look at the illustrations closely and imagine the lives of the people. Do they look happy? Why do you think the illustrator chose to draw so many groups of people rather than focusing on Keiran? What does it suggest about Bondi in the 1930s? How does this affect the way we take meaning from the book?
- Why do you think Saxon changes his attitude to Keiran when he falls off the tram?
- Do you think Mr Francis understands Keiran love of the trams by giving him a job at the beachfront and travel on the tram? Look at the picture of him. Is his face kind do you think?

## Literary 'gap'

All good texts, especially those for children, contain what Reader Response theorists call the 'literary gap'. That is, they leave space for each reader to interpret the text rather than telling us everything. Consider the following gaps left by the writer:

- Saxon didn't like Keiran being a paperboy initially, but when Keiran fell, he was helpful. Why did he change his mind do you think?
- Why do you think Keiran's Dad gets cross when Keiran jumps off the tram? What would your Dad do?
- Why do you think Mr Francis gives Keiran another job, and one that he will need to catch the tram to get to?

## Historical

There is much in the words and images to explore in terms of the historical setting, such as:

- Trams. Find out when the trams stopped running in Bondi. There is a good history at <http://www.bondivillage.com/thenow.htm#tram>
- Which cities still have trams? For example, Melbourne is famous for them and San Francisco has its cable cars.
- Paperboys. Do paperboys still deliver papers in the mornings? Why do you think this has changed?
- Swimming costumes. Look at the pictures of the swimming costumes and compare with today's beach wear. What do the changes tell us about changes in society's values and attitudes?
- Examine the clothing, such as the hats that both men and women wear, also in terms of how different society is now.
- Look at the pictures of the bicycles and cars and how different are they from today's bikes. Consider the role of advanced technology.
- Morning and evening papers – now we only have morning papers. Discuss reasons for the change, such as nightly television news and the internet.
- Keiran is allowed to sell papers at age nine. Would he be allowed to today? Why has this changed, do you think?
- Keiran always has bare feet. Would you like to go without shoes? Why do you think that is no longer acceptable, except perhaps on holidays at the beach?
- Consider the way that Vivas has drawn the people on the tram and the way they relate to each other. Is this different from today?

- Trams. Keiran wants to be a tram driver when he grows up. Do you think he will be?

### **Language**

While this is a very visually appealing text, the language is also evocative.

- Consider how Hathorn builds the excitement and tension when Keiran has his first trip on the tram with such words as 'thrust', 'loud', 'brash', 'pressed', 'flicked', 'swung', 'shuddered'.
- There is also language that is specific to the time and the subject matter, such as 'running-board', 'curved brass rail', 'slatted wooden seats', 'small fry', 'conductor'.
- Look at the 'noisy' language used to evoke the sounds of the tram, such as 'gnashing sound', and the language that conveys the movement of the tram, such as 'swaying movement' and 'spun along the silver rails', used by Hathorn and use this as a model for writing about another noisy and/or dynamic event.

### **Artwork**

- Vivas uses the colours of summer, of the beach, of a past era, of calmness and happiness. It wasn't of course; it was the Depression. Why do you think Vivas chose these colours?
- Design, examine the various perspectives from which we view the action and how it affects our response to the image. For example:
  - the village of Bondi tumbling down the hill
  - the cross section of the tram with the car beside it
  - Keiran falling from the tram
- Consider the page without words – why are words not needed?
- How does the author make us feel the pleasure of the water?
- Vivas chose the medium of watercolour. Paint a scene in this medium and then use another medium such as pastels or pencils to see the effect it has on how we feel about the picture. Which do you think works best? Why?
- Consider how Vivas slows the action and creates a sense of tension by the way she draws Keiran tumbling off the tram.
- Vivas makes strong and varied use of figures in the foreground against those in the background, especially in terms of size and close focus. For example, consider the effect of how large Dad is when he is speaking to Keiran after he jumps off the moving tram and how that makes us feel.

## **Drama**

- Act out Saxon on the tram. Be as 'agile as a monkey'.
- What would he say to people *as* he sells the papers, or *to* sell the papers?
- What conversations would the people on the tram be having with each other – look at the second double page spread. Act one of those characters.
- Act Keiran practising selling papers on the tram. Pretend to hold the papers and the money. Then use newspapers, a purse and balance on a bench to see how hard it would be to stay on your feet.
- Hot seat various characters such as Saxon, Keiran, Mr Francis, Keiran's Dad and the conductor.

## **Extending on the text**

- Imagine you are Keiran and you have been transported to 2006. Describe what amazes you about this time in history compared to the 1930s. You might like to draw or paint in watercolours rather than write.
- OR
- Imagine that Keiran has come to live with you. What would you show him about our world?
- Keiran wants to be a tram driver when he grows up. Imagine that he does become a driver and write/draw/paint/storyboard/animate what it is like.
- Be reporter for the local newspaper who is covering the story of the paperboy who jumped off a moving tram. Interview witnesses as well as the major players and write a headline and the story.

## **For younger readers prep to two**

While this is not a simple book, it is certainly one that this age group will enjoy hearing, and looking at the evocative pictures closely. They will enjoy Keiran's little sister, Isabelle, and her teddy (especially when he is on his potty and she is on the toilet). She appears on the first page, underneath the wave at the beach, and on the toilet.

- There are lots of 'noisy' words for the sounds of the tram, such as 'rattled', 'gnashing sound of the wheels on the silver rails'. Have the students make the sounds of the trams rattling along the tracks as you read. They will have to get faster and slower with the variations of the movement of the tram.
- Vivas uses the lovely, warm colours of the beach in summer. Talk about the way certain colours make us feel, and whether this is a happy or a sad book. Using watercolour paint, have the children paint a feeling, or season, such as summer/winter choosing colours that express the emotion or season.

- Invite children to make personal connections with the text. For example, does their family go the beach? Do they wear swimming costumes like these ones? Do they have toys like Keiran's and Isabelle's?

## **Further Reading**

### **History**

#### **Picture books**

*Papa and the Olden Days* by Ian Edwards and Rachel Tonkin

*What was the War Like Grandma?* by Rachel Tonkin

*When I was a Kid* by Rachel Tonkin

#### **Novels**

*The Bamboo Flute* by Garry Disher

*Somewhere Around the Corner* by Jackie French

*The True Story of Spit McPhee* by James Aldridge

#### **Film**

*The Paperboy* directed by Paul Cox (Winners series)

#### **Trams**

*The Great Tram Race* by Lowen Clarke