

Bush Boys Books - more than Adventures

Five Books in Four Volumes so far, and with More On The Way

OVERVIEW

- 1. First and foremost, the Bush Boys Books are adventures for boys. So they were written to be enjoyed rather than analyzed. However, it was foreseen that girls would read them and, as critics of the draft texts, girls were more helpful than boys.
- 2. They enmesh as adventures the camping 'doctrine' of the *ABC of Camping* (*Australian Bush Catechism of Camping*) with its 50 Questions & Answers published in April 1989, before the first book was even thought of. This learning from life or a life-like story is called **life-situational catechesis**. Both the adventures and the bush catechism teach readers bushy Safety First, to encourage their own camping. Incidentally, the idea of a bush catechism came from the author writing his Catholic Family Catechism.
- 3. The adventures are also a **life-situational catechesis in religion and morality**. They enmesh religious doctrine from the Q&As in the Catholic Family Catechism. In a catechism, Q&As are skeletons (without a skeleton we would be jelly-fish) but they 'come alive' when enmeshed in life-situations.
- 4. Further, the books are **life-situational catechesis on family life**, and affirming both the overlap and complementarity of the sexes.

DETAILED INFORMATION

The stories are packed with detailed information:

1. bushwalking/camping **basics** on water & food, clothing & shelter, fires & cooking, latrines & washing, discipline & navigation, etc; and also...
2. interlarded with a vast variety of interesting **snippets** which enrich the narrative.

REALISM

1. **The characters are endearing** and 'real', since they are drawn from life, drawn like an artist's sketch or teased out like threads. Hence the testimonies:

"I would love to have those boys as my friends" [from a boy-reader in a big family]; and "The Bush Boys are part of our family" [which was said by two mothers on opposite sides of the Pacific Ocean].

- The boys are largely **revealed by what they say or do**, or what others say about them, as in real life, so that the reader feels inside the story. On the other hand, the author sometimes encourages identification with one character, by a direct narration of his thoughts, yet leaving the reader free to identify with whom he will, and not spoiling it by giving the ages of the boys.
- 2. The **geography** is always the Wild Bush Mountains, and the **time-frame** of the five books is spread over a mere two months. The Bush is portrayed as the best and proper playground for children, especially boys, to grow up in.
- 3. The dynamism of the plots is helped by adding **new characters** book by book. Yet even in the fifth book, with a new family in the foreground, the background characters of the district are still the same, and its recent and past history is shared by all.

GROUP DYNAMICS

This point on adding new characters is worth developing. The way two people 'get on together' often depends on who else is present. For instance, with the coming of Cuthbert, quite unconsciously Bernie and John tend to become a sub-group from their older brothers. The third book is driven not only by the bushrangers' gold, but by the rival groups from the Wild Bush Mountains' Grammar School; and in the fourth, there are Kevin and Sam. And the fifth book centres on a completely new and quite different family.

Sequences of gender among siblings subtly shifts relationships. If Tilly Lawson had been older than Joe, he might have been boss of the younger boys, instead of a junior to his older brothers. In the Bush Boy books, the gangs are bonded by brothers as well as mates, with cousins somewhere between. This is a feature usual in larger families, and peer groups outside the family should complement, not suffocate it.

In bigger families, older children mature more rapidly by taking responsibility for younger siblings, who in turn also mature more rapidly, for they tend to seize their chance and 'do things' at a younger age in the company of those just a little older than them.

SOME LITERARY TECHNIQUES

1. Lots of **direct speech** helps reduce the author's dominance over the reader as he narrates the story.

2. Literary devices, in both the stories and the Bush Catechism, include **rhythmic prose, rhyme and alliteration**: the kitchen taps were labelled 'hot, rot and rain', and handkerchiefs are for 'holding hot handles, bush baths and bandages'; plus jingles like 'food that is easy to package, prepare and wash up'.

3. Descriptions of **bush beauty**:

As yet the boys did not foresee an even greater happiness. The bush's wild and lyric beauty were beyond their wildest imaginings: those rugged ridges, tall trees and scratchy scrub, rocks and rapids, wind and water, light on leaves, cliffs and waterfalls, the rush or trickle of water, inviting pools, awe-inspiring distances, and the wonder of bird calls amid uncivilized silences; the panting thrill of a steep uphill climb, with the ridges opposite seemingly climbing higher with them; endless vistas off hills and lookdowns; and those other thrills of precipitous descents that jellied the knees, or rock-hopping in creeks and clambering over boulders; let alone the final glory of camp fires, damper, billy tea, sizzling sausages, and the tang of wood smoke.

4. **Carefully planned details**. For instance, in *New Boys in the Bush*, in the first week when the boys are pioneers, merit and mischief of all three are spread over the six days; also in the second week, as explorers, the Seven Deadly Dangers that lead to death in the bush are given a day each (fudging a little with the sixth split into dehydration (and heat exhaustion) and sun-stroke (=hyperthermia), since there was no chance of the seventh, hypothermia, in searing summer heat. Jack has a definite plan in selecting places to explore, Dad's tutoring prepares for or follows these up.

The author calculated things like the speed of the Land Rover rolling down The Tumbledown: a deacceleration of ½g from the passion fruit vines would only require the force of a push-up for the boys to brace themselves against dashboard and steering wheel.

Other calculations convinced the author that the second clothesline could not get enough sun close-to behind the house, even in summer, let alone winter.

INTERWOVEN THEMES

The story line in all five Bush Boys Books is adventures. Into this adventure framework, beneath the surface, are a number of interwoven themes touching on the weightier matters of life:

- **Stable marriages** (also coping with one parent dead) as the firm basis for family life and raising children.
- **Complementarity of bread-winner and home-maker.**
- The fathers in the various families exemplify their proper **fatherly role**.
- These books have been welcomed as wholesome for **manners, courtesies and virtues**, and these are not weakened but rather made more convincing by some naughtiness and the possibility of consequences, if and when they are caught at it.
- The Boy Scouts started in 1907 as a **movement**, and did not become an **organization** until later. By contrast, Appendix 3 in *Bush Boys on the Move* proposes a new family-based formation in bushcraft, so that no formal organization would ever be needed.
- **Christianity** is presented as a normal part of an integrated life, and not 'a private extra' never to be mentioned. Yet the author must avoid being 'preachy'. The Catholic Church is more prominent than the Anglican or Uniting (which get honourable mentions) for, after all, the author is a Catholic priest.
- The Bush Boys Books may be unique in Australian children's adventure stories in that three of them have an unusual background of **homeschooling**, though not mentioned till the end of the second book.
- The boys are very **conscious of not being girls**. And the girls are conscious of *not* doing everything boys do, even if sometimes they would like to. They do not usually dress like the boys, and they exemplify a growing towards a mothering role, including that of ennobling boys and men, and redeeming their tendencies to brutishness, as wives and mothers must do to sensitize the emotional lives of husbands and sons — there is 'a lack' in males from original sin, and from fatherly inadequacies in former generations, and the greater psycho-fragility of males.
- There is **no profanity, crudity, obscenity**. Even the euphemisms for profanity are avoided: Gosh, Golly, by Gum, Geewhiz, Gee, Jeez, drat, damn, heck etc.
- **The absence of TV** might shock readers. Fathers particularly find it hard to forego the news and sport.
- Fountain Resources have rated these books (in Charlotte Mason's phrase) as '**living books**':
written by an author who is passionate about what he is writing... books full of ideas which feed the heart, soul and mind of the child.

FEATURES of NEW BOYS IN THE BUSH

The fifth book breaks new ground by introducing the Lawson family's nine children. It still teaches the Seven Deadly Dangers that lead to death in the bush, but does so negatively (for variety).

- Parents Max and Meg, and the three heroes, Jack, Jim and Joe, **know nothing about bushwalking or camping**, despite their direct descent from Lawson the explorer and Cox the road-builder.
- Moreover, both parents are **vague and permissive** — but not on faith, morals or manners:
... [they're] real strict about doing what we're told, and being polite and all that, and saying prayers and polishing boots, and lights out and getting up early, but they do let us do what we like an awful lot.
- The early rising is an example of **hidden strengths** making up for permissiveness. Early rising requires discipline and self-discipline - going to bed before one feels like it. This is a significant factor in the upbringing of boys, especially adolescents.
- Dad particularly believes in the **Discovery Method/Technique**. He uses it extensively as a mathematics teacher, with hands-on models like practical science, and seems to apply it to nearly everything.
- So the boys have to **learn** the essential lessons of Safety First **the hard way**: indeed, day by day they are lucky to survive their near disasters in living on a hobby-farm and going on bush expeditions.
- The youthful reader will scarcely take in (and he is not meant to) one of the conclusions to the book, that Dad and the boys '**discover**' that **the discovery method on its own is an awful mistake**. The boys have increasingly suspected it as the story develops.
- A major sub-theme which sets the parameters of the story is buying an ancient mansion going cheap because it **lacks electric power**. They are too poor to have the electricity connected, and again, plausible reasons explain it.
- Nanna asserts provocatively that modern man is a spoilt child who takes for granted his ownership of many slaves, i.e. **electric slaves** that hasten to his bidding at the flick of a switch. A computer is the ultimate in slave-ownership and slave-driving, with the operator a potentate at the keyboard.
- Then there is the family's **apostolate of hospitality**, and firm belief in the possibility of good influences on visitors, especially by the children when 'on their own turf'; as well as the socialization of the children beyond their immediate family, from nuclear family to extended family, and beyond.
- Mr Max Lawson is given to **lateral thinking** and log books. He has brainwaves (or brainstorm!) like cross-age tutoring, the convivium, the Creation Classroom:
everything we study in school is about God or His creation; or about man imitating the Creator in doing things...
- Mrs Meg Lawson's contribution is loads of common sense; Jack's pessimism balances Jim's optimism, his caution balancing reckless rashness; while Joe's sturdy independence keeps them all on their toes.

Father James Tierney, the author