

Beatie Bow springboard

Year 8

STELLA®

Peter Bulkeley

In third term I thought I would teach *Playing Beatie Bow* in the ambitious belief that Year 8's might (should?) learn a little of Australia's experience in the nineteenth century in general and life in the Sydney Rocks area in particular. The class was a mixed ability/gender Year 8 which in Term 1 had been mesmerised by John Marsden's *Tomorrow When The War Began* and in Term 2 had, mostly, enjoyed Libby Gleeson's *Refuge*.

We did not get far into the book when there were the usual cries of "This is boring!" "Do we have to read this?" and "Can we do something modern?" However, there were a large number of students who clearly enjoyed the mystery, the fantasy elements and the experiences of a girl their own age. This was reflected in their reading journals where many students identified with Abigail's family dynamics and her romantic aspirations. Overall though, I would say the feeling was that not many would recommend it to their friends as essential teenage reading (like *Dolly* and *Girlfriend*).

So... how to extract a useful exercise from the fantastical experiences of a cool fourteen year old girl suddenly finding herself in the hurly burly squalor of 1870s Sydney. The task I devised was a research assignment ("Boring! Boring!") on a person, place, or event in Australian history. Initially the guideline was pre-1960 but this became flexible for some weaker students.

The first task was to select their subject and this involved some directed browsing of the Australian History section of the library. Some students quickly determined who or what they would find out about while others needed lots of help. In a few cases the expectations and parameters had to be diluted to accommodate the weaker students. This meant there were assignments done on Wally Lewis and Ted Whitten, both famous and fairly contemporary football legends. The idea was to find information that would enable the student to get a feel for the subject and its time and context. This was essential for the major part of the assignment and which, as it turned out, redeemed the whole project in the eyes of most students.

The main task, and what linked it to Abigail's experience in *Beatie Bow*, was the "Time Travel" piece. Students had to travel back in time and involve themselves with the person, place or event. It was up to them what they did. Of course I made some suggestions along the lines of the interview, the contemporary newspaper report, the letter to/from a friend, the diary entry and a number of students used one of these approaches. This was certainly the most creative and enjoyable aspect of the whole assignment. Students were able to combine their imagination with the historical facts to produce some fascinating pieces. These included interviews with the founders of Cobb & Co, Kingsford-Smith, and Marjorie Jackson; a startling account of a confrontation with the Kelly gang; a gruesome diary entry of a survivor of the *Batavia*; realistic eyewitness accounts of a family man at the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, a young environmentally aware 2000 teenager on the horrors of the Byron Bay whaling industry and, of course, the loyal fan at the MCG for Ted Whitten's final game. The stand-out piece was the extraordinary assignment on Sir Mark Oliphant where the student went back in time, met him in 1941, told him about the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

and succeeded in persuading him to not get involved in the Manhattan Project, thereby changing history.

I think that by writing what was effectively an historical fiction piece the students increased their appreciation for the work involved for Ruth Park in making Sydney's Rocks area in the nineteenth century come alive. There were a number of other positives in the exercise. Students improved their library skills, they had to employ precis writing, bibliographic details were assessed, some used the internet. Discerning the relevant from the mass was a challenge and when it was completed students undertook a class presentation on their subject with special emphasis on their time travel piece.

I would use this exercise again in conjunction with *Beatie Bow*. The novel offers a model for marrying history and fantasy with fiction. Like a lot of texts that we teach, students have to get beyond the cover and the date of publication to discover the merit of the work. If we can enthuse about the text's good qualities then we can, hopefully, inspire students to produce quality related work themselves. This exercise provides an opportunity for students of all abilities to explore their interests and use their imaginations. In my class a number of students were able to produce their personal best whether it was the less skilled boy cheering on Ted Whitten at the MCG or the gifted girl persuading Mark Oliphant to abandon the development of nuclear weapons.