

# *The Hounded*

Simon Butters

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## Study guide

Notes prepared by Simon Butters © 2016

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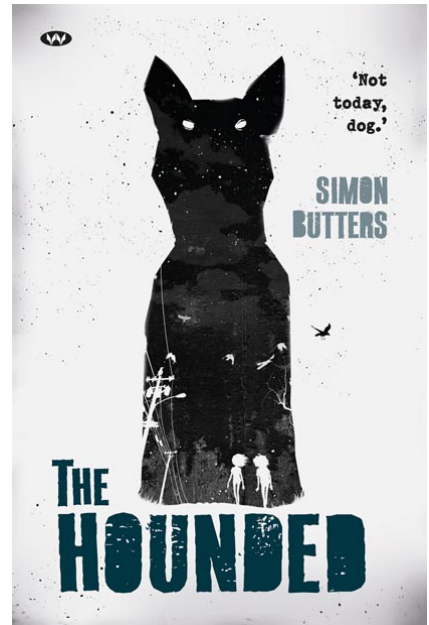
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## Introduction

This study guide complements the study of *The Hounded* by Simon Butters for middle secondary, SACE 1 and 2 students and adult readers.

*The Hounded* is a coming-of-age story about love, connectedness and purpose told through the eyes of central protagonist, fifteen-year-old Monty, as he experiences the many ups and downs of growing up while dealing with an undiagnosed mental illness.

The guide offers a range of activities and information to help teachers and students form a deeper understanding of the issues raised and some of the literary techniques employed by the writer to inform their analysis.

## Cover analysis

Before you open the book, what do you notice about the cover? What visual imagery do you see? At first glance, the dog possibly looks shadowy, as if it is a



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projection of sorts. Notice also the two central figures of a boy and girl walking together at night, heads tilted towards each other in mirrored reflection. Notice also the birds on the wire that are flying away, and the sole bird that has left the shadow of the dog. Look also at the dog's eyes appearing like two swirling galaxies, and the stars. What do you think this visual imagery means?

### **TASK**

Write a response to these questions:

1. What do you think the dog symbolises?
2. What do you think the stars and galaxies mean?
3. What do you think the birds on the wire symbolise?
4. What do you think the tone of the book will be from the quote on the cover, 'Not today, dog'?

### **Context**

*The Hounded* was nominated (under the title *Black Dog*) for the 2014 Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature unpublished manuscript award, which led to publication by Wakefield Press. Butters was inspired by the comedic, semi-autobiographical works of David Sedaris (*Naked*), the investigation of youth in various works by Australian author Tim Winton, and his lifelong interest in absurdist playwrights such as Beckett and Ionesco.

### **Audience**

*The Hounded* is written for young adult readers primarily around the age of the protagonist (fifteen) however the broader themes in the novel also lend themselves to adult audiences. The work should also be accessible to younger readers (lower secondary, upper primary) as the writing style is very conversational and the chapters are relatively short. Teachers of the text at any year level should be mindful of some of the content in regard to youth suicide and depression. Teachers should be advised to contact their school counsellor in regard to support services offered by their educational site and the wider community prior to teaching the text.

### **Purpose**

In writing *The Hounded* Butters explores themes of disconnection, alienation, the ramifications of suicide, and depression in younger people. The text is also an examination of the absurd and existentialism, explored through the various comedic anecdotes about the small things in life, such as Monty's contemplation about crumbs on his kitchen floor:



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*Years worth of breadcrumbs were taking up residence down there, unswept, threatening to create an ecosystem of their own. Those crumbs might clump together, I thought, to one day form little planets made entirely of crumbs. And on those little crumb planets, maybe a whole new civilisation of tiny creatures would evolve. One day, they'd become so advanced they'd send up little spaceships to explore their universe and come to the startling conclusion that they were all just crumbs. (p. 6)*

Through the various comedic asides, Butters explores the meaning (or meaninglessness) of existence through the narrow lens of the protagonist, Monty. The purpose of the text is to engage readers via a love story and oddball humour to examine deeper social issues of purpose and connection.

Furthermore, *The Hounded* explores grief, death and the consequences of a person's decision to end their life. Butters confronts the social and emotional costs of suicide, yet offers readers hope through Monty's strength of will with his final decision to keep moving forward, expressed by the final line 'Not today, dog. Not today' (p. 279).

## Setting

*The Hounded* is set in the fictional Australian town of Middleford. It is a town on the outskirts of the suburban sprawl, where once rich and fertile land has given way to development. The township is an outlier, distant from the world, and on the very edge of civilisation. Both the highway and the train terminate at Middleford and beyond its walls of corrugated iron a wild expanse beckons. As Monty laments:

*The good folk of Middleford were protected by a battlement of identical rear fences, keeping out marauders and feral goats. Over those fences people had hot running water, air conditioning and electric toothbrushes. On the wild side, there was nothing but needle grass and rolling hills. We ventured into the wilderness. Out there, in the shadow lands, we didn't exist. (p. 32)*

The township *personifies* the unstable mindset of the protagonist as disconnected from the real world, on the edge of madness, and delving into a magical mystery linked to a dangerous landscape. Inside the confines of the town, the protagonist feels constrained, somewhat hopeless, yet protected. As Monty explores the outside world, he moves into darker territory symbolised by the dangerous *visual imagery* of 'wilderness' and 'shadow lands' where his very existence comes under question. An initial reading of the text would suggest Monty is depressed, however Monty's observations of Eliza allude to the possibility that she also harbours dark thoughts. In this way, Monty is not the only person who is 'hounded'.



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Butters uses *personification* of Monty's house as 'the ghost house' with 'glowering eyes' and 'fangs ready to devour passing children' (p. 14) to explore how family history and genetics contribute to his state of mind. The house works as a *symbol* of Monty's family history, his mother, her own struggles with mental illness, and the way gossip and fear spreads leading to social isolation. The house has fallen into complete disrepair, symbolising the chaotic breakdown of his family unit and mental state. Monty imagines that the house was not always so disordered and that in some earlier history:

*... parents would chat over low fences, songs would be sung  
around the piano, hot roasts would be carved and families would  
tell each other they loved them. (p. 15)*

In this passage, Monty laments the familial comfort and love that he never experienced. He begins to recognise that other families live differently to his, contributing to his growing awareness of how parental neglect has affected him.

In chapter sixteen, after Monty's mother leaves home to recuperate in a mental health facility, Monty and his father paint the house until it gleams 'with a cheerful looking smile' (p. 217). The resurrection of the house also symbolises the gradual repair of Monty's familial bonds. Butters hints towards a hope for the future for Monty, linked to family reconnection.

### **TASK**

What other passages can you find where Butters uses setting and personification to symbolise deeper meaning?

### **Tone**

Butters employs a whimsical and introspective *tone* for Monty's narration. The tone shifts quickly from comic to poignant sorrow in order to elicit an emotional response from the reader. Butters seeks to explore meaning and purpose such as in this passage about a feral cat whose

*eyes were wild and the noise that came out of it was the sound of  
pure insanity. I loved that sound. I'd walk past the open door,  
goading it to scream and yowl at me one more time. My mother  
hollered at me to leave it alone. We had to wait until my dad  
finished work and came home to scare it out. He took one look at  
it, and raced at it carrying a cricket bat. It took off out the  
window, leaving its kittens mewling away, helpless. Why it chose to  
have its kittens in my mother's undies remained a mystery. Maybe  
it knew it wasn't cut out for motherhood and left them there in  
hope we'd care for them. The next day they were all gone. There  
was a fresh hole filled up in the garden. I would have liked a  
kitten. (p. 3)*



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The playful anecdote about a feral cat that had kittens in Monty's mother's undies drawer symbolises madness, failed motherhood and neglect. Furthermore, the passage is a good example of how Butters shifts tone from comedic to poignant after his father (presumably) killed the kittens overnight.

### **TASK**

What other examples in the text can you find where Butters shifts tone (such as from whimsical to tragic) for effect?

*(Look for: descriptions of the dog, the rose, Eliza's father and religion, descriptions of Pippa Wilson, and the description of the shipwreck and burning chicks.)*

## **Themes**

### **Neglect**

The novel opens with Monty finding the black dog in his room on his fifteenth birthday, which he initially mistakes for a birthday present from his family, yet he has doubts. We discover that Monty has a history of parental neglect:

*My parents hadn't mentioned birthdays since I was six. They never told me why, but I figured they thought birthday celebrations were for little kids. By age six they must have deemed I was old enough to celebrate birthdays on my own. Either that or they'd just plain forgotten how to parent. Maybe both. (p. 8)*

Children at risk of suffering a mental illness often have some history of abuse or neglect in their early years. Monty, while not physically abused, suffers emotional abuse in the form of isolation and lack of intimacy from his parents.

### **TASK**

Write a response to these questions:

1. What do you think the effects of neglect are on a developing mind?
2. Does Monty have no friends because he is a 'bad' person, or is it that he just doesn't know how to communicate?
3. How does Butters illustrate the theme of neglect in *The Hounded*?

Remember to refer to the text in your responses.

### **Mental illness**

An initial reading of the text would identify the appearance of the black dog as a symbol associated with melancholy and depression. The symbol has been used in various ways such as the Black Dog Institute (a mental health not-for-profit organisation) and multiple references throughout literature and social discourse.



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Black dogs may have *connotation* with supernatural familiars, psychological trauma, and as a symbol of depression.

Teacher resource. For an interesting history of the usage of the symbol of the black dog, view this article:

<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/docs/Michael.pdf>

### **TASK**

Write a response. What do you think the dog is/represents?

- a) a manifestation of Monty's depression?
- b) something supernatural or magical?
- c) a real talking dog?
- d) part of Monty's split personality?
- e) a combination of the above or something else.

Remember to refer to the text in your responses.

While Monty does see and hear a dog that the other characters do not, he never fully confronts his own mental health. Monty is cognisant that he is different to other people. He ruminates about his condition but never seeks to find help for his state of mind. He prefers to believe that he can solve his troubles on his own, probably out of his isolation. The effect on the reader can sometimes be frustrating, as the reader gains more knowledge about events and characters in the story than Monty seems able to understand (*dramatic irony*). Again, Butters uses a whimsical *tone* as Monty explains,

*If you haven't noticed by now I suffer from some kind of affliction. My mind tends to wander. I don't mean this in the figurative way, like I'm constantly daydreaming, although most of my teachers believe this is the case. I mean it in a very literal way. My mind actually wanders. It leaves me. Sometimes for hours. It can happen anytime, anyplace. There's no trigger, no rhyme or reason, it just happens. I have no control. It's like an out-of-body experience. I'm on autopilot. I could be just about to cross a busy road, or discover one of humanity's enduring secrets when my mind will simply disappear. My eyes roll back into my skull. The world around me fades. A numb feeling spreads all over my body. I have no sense of touch, no sense of taste. Nothing. I can still see and hear, but that's about it. It's as if my head has suddenly been separated from my body. I am decapitated, and my mind dropped into a jar of thick jelly. (p. 9)*

In this passage, Butters hints towards Monty's deeper affliction. As a result of childhood emotional abuse and neglect, Monty suffers what is called a dissociative



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disorder. Someone with a dissociative disorder escapes reality in ways that are involuntary and unhealthy. They may experience disconnection, lack of continuity between thoughts, their memories, surroundings, actions and identity and suffer bouts of amnesia brought on by stress. One form of this disorder is dissociative identity disorder commonly known as the spilt personality, or multiple personality disorder. Another form is depersonalisation or derealisation disorder where the afflicted person feels as if they are disconnected from their body, as if they are in a dream, or that they are viewing the world around them from the point of view of an outside observer.

### **TASK**

Find other examples from the text that explore Monty's experience of depersonalisation/derealisation disorder.

*(Look for: descriptions of lost time, descriptions of his mind leaving him, his body on autopilot, observing himself from afar during times of stress, riding a bus, walking home from school, going to the beach without knowing how he got there.)*

### **Social isolation**

Monty informs the reader that he only has one friend: Gutentag. Monty believes Gutentag communicates via instant messages but translates his messages from German. The responses are often meaningless and absurd. Absurdism was a movement in the theatre that questions the nature of existence in an incomprehensible universe. Meaning and purpose are rendered as imponderables. Questions are integral to plays in the absurdist tradition, such as *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard.

### **TASK**

To what extent does Monty's point of view of his world reflect the absurdist tradition?

Monty and Eliza's love story is told through the constant threat of social isolation. Monty is aware that Eliza's standing in the school will be destroyed if her peers discover their secret friendship. Butters *foreshadows* the danger by demonstrating the repercussions of social isolation when Amy Fotheringham is forced to leave school and work in the supermarket. Monty regrets his part in her social demise but is unable to offer solace as he observes:

*Amy began to cry. I sat next to her, unsure what to do. All I could offer was the solace of my presence. Once, she would have been content to watch me writhe in this kind of pain. But there she was, her anguish exposed. It made me ill to watch. (p. 119)*

### **TASK**

Find other examples from the text that explore the theme of social isolation.



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(Look for: bullying, descriptions of hierarchy, Tim Smith, moving silently, descriptions of teachers.)

The list of themes in this study guide is by no means exhaustive. What other themes do you see? Power? Control? The alpha male? Communication? Misunderstanding?

## **Intertextuality**

What thematic and contextual links are there between *The Hounded* and other texts?

### **Indirect or thematic connections to absurdist works**

Look for passages in *The Hounded* such as Monty pondering meaning and purpose in the face of an incomprehensible universe. Look for indirect or thematic connections with plays such as *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett or *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard.

### **Direct connections or literary allusions**

Look at the conversation between Gutentag and Monty in *The Hounded* and the passage in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

*The Hounded* (p. 94):

**@Gutentag**

What is happy?

**@The Full Monty**

Having fun, I guess.

**@Gutentag**

What is happy?

**@The Full Monty**

A smile. Sunshine. Being together.

**@Gutentag**

What is happy?



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## @The Full Monty

I don't really know.

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (p. 7).

**Guil:** Are you happy?

**Ros:** What?

**Guil:** Content? At ease?

**Ros:** I suppose so.

**Guil:** What are you going to do now?

**Ros:** I don't know. What do you want to do?

**Guil:** I have no desires. None.

In the above comparison, Butters uses literary *allusion* about happiness to explore an absurdist viewpoint. In both texts the characters bring up the notion of being happy and quickly come to a realisation that they do not know what it is. The very meaning of happiness seems absurd.

### Direct connections or literary allusions

Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* tells the story of a man who returns from the underworld to live life again, so that he might chastise his wife. Yet Sisyphus enjoys life and will not return to the underworld, whereupon he is seized and given a rock to carry up a mountain for eternity. His entire being is an absurd penalty of torture that accomplishes nothing.

In this profound and moving philosophical statement, Camus poses the fundamental question: is life worth living? If human existence holds no significance, what can keep us from suicide? As Camus argues, if there is no God to give meaning to our lives, humans must take on that purpose themselves. This is our 'absurd' task, like Sisyphus forever rolling his rock up a hill, as the inevitability of death constantly overshadows us. Camus describes how Sisyphus, and by extension humanity, finds existential meaning in struggle:

*The absurd man says yes and his efforts will henceforth be unceasing. (Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus)*

Similarly, in *The Hounded Monty* discovers that one possible reason for his mother's state of mind is her guilt about deserting her oldest son, the



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intellectually disabled Silas. Butters uses literary *allusion* with the similar sounding names of Silas and Sisyphus. Further connections are made; where Sisyphus rolls a rock uphill for eternity, Silas unceasingly rolls a ball. Monty ponders his brother's absurd compulsion to roll the ball, and eventually finds solace in Silas's unceasing struggle. A direct comparison of the texts reveals:

*The rock is still rolling. (Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus)*

*Now I wander the country, rolling, like Silas and his ball. (p. 277)*

Through the use of *allusion*, Butters evokes in readers a deeper understanding about the worth of life through struggle. Monty discovers meaning in the struggle to survive and in this way, Butters offers hope for sufferers of anxiety and depression to keep moving forward.

## Language features and conventions

The novel uses a variety of literary techniques in order to shape meaning for the reader. Read through the descriptions below and cite examples from the text.

### Bildungsroman

Monty's coming-of-age story is an example of *Bildungsroman*: a novel concerned with the education, development and maturing of a young protagonist. Monty journeys through a tumultuous period of his youth where he learns about others, himself, and what it takes to move forward in life – not to mention, how to deal with the dog. Look through the chapters and chart his development. In each chapter, what does he learn about others? What does he learn about himself?

### First person – unreliable narrator

*The Hounded* is told in the *first person narrative* (I, we, my, etc.) as opposed to third person (he, she, they, etc.). The use of first person narrative places the reader in the mind of the protagonist, so to speak. The choice is important, as main themes in *The Hounded* are miscommunication and social disconnection. The reader views the story through Monty's narrow, peculiar perspective. The choice of first-person narration is used to identify Monty with the reader, and to enable the reader to 'see the world' through his eyes. Monty has a unique view of the world and a singular voice that is best suited to first person narrative.

Monty makes mistakes and learns that his first impressions of the people around him are often incorrect. His narration is unreliable to the extent that he is misguided. Monty is not the type of unreliable narrator who attempts to fool the reader into a false view of the world or their actions, but Monty is unreliable in such that he is naïve about what motivates other people in his life. Butters employs the device of an *unreliable narrator* in order to illuminate new and often contradictory information about the secondary characters. In this way Monty



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(and vicariously the reader) gains new insight and understanding of the world, which contributes to his growing sense of identity and coming-of-age.

### **TASK**

How does Monty misunderstand the other characters in his life?:

- 1) His mother?
- 2) Eliza?
- 3) His father?
- 4) Tony Papadopoulos?
- 5) Pippa Wilson?
- 6) Gutentag?
- 7) The dog?

### **Magical realism**

*Magical realism* is the matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastical or magical elements into a seemingly realistic fiction. Butters uses the literary mode of magical realism to include fantastical elements such as the talking dog into a narrative that would otherwise be a realistic portrayal about a teenage boy in a high school setting. An interpretation of the black dog as a supernatural force and Monty's experiences of alternate planes of existence, juxtaposed with the realism of the schoolyard is an example of magical realism.

### **Anthropomorphism**

Butters uses *anthropomorphism* by giving human qualities to the black dog such as the ability to talk, befriend, manipulate and conceal motives. However, various readers may interpret the ambiguous symbol of the dog differently. As such, anthropomorphism in regard to a supernatural or psychological manifestation may not be accurate for all readers.

### **Personification**

As discussed, Butters employs the use of *personification* of the house in order to create new meaning in regard to Monty's state of mind and his connections with family. A good task is to explore the differences between personification and anthropomorphism and to find examples from the text of the two.

### **Simile**

Butters often uses simile to create a sense of colloquial language which gives rise to Monty's particular voice, as when Monty describes how his body 'will often walk me around like some kind of zombie, pretending to still be a part of the living' (p. 9). A good task is to run an analytical race in a group, where the winner is the quickest to find an example of simile from the text and describe how the writer uses the technique for effect.

Various other techniques to explore during literary analysis are:



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**Metaphor**

**Visual imagery**

**Tactile imagery**

**Gustatory imagery**

**Olfactory imagery**

**Pathetic fallacy**

**TASK**

Run further analytical notes to find examples of these literary techniques and analyse their effect on the reader.

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