



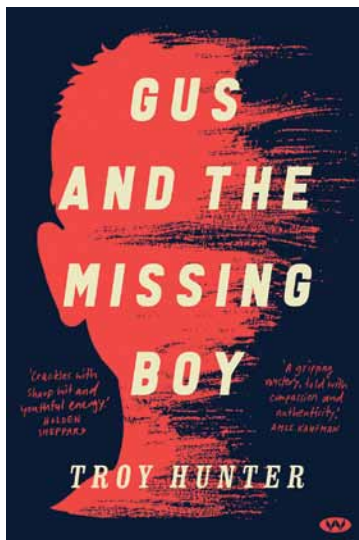
# Wakefield Press

## TEACHERS' NOTES

### Gus and the Missing Boy

By Troy Hunter

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## 1. Introduction to *Gus and the Missing Boy*

True crime buff Gus Green has always felt out of place in the world. He's overweight, gay, his injured mum's primary carer, and he only has two real friends: sporty Kane and feisty Shell, who are both dealing with their own problems.

Gus's life is flipped on its head one day when he finds a missing persons website with a digitally aged picture of a missing boy who looks eerily like him. Could he be a kidnapping victim? It would explain a lot about his patchy background, but what would that make his mum – his kidnapper?

As Gus and his friends dive into the mystery, their investigation reveals more questions than answers. Can they unravel the case before his world falls apart? And what will they do if the truth is too much to handle?

## 2. About the author

Troy Hunter is an adult and YA fiction writer whose short stories have appeared in a variety of publications and journals. He lives in Melbourne and works as a marketing and communications consultant. *Gus and the Missing Boy* is his first novel.

## 3. Inspiration behind the novel

This story began years ago when I stumbled upon a US-based missing kids website. Desperate parents were clearly paying for the website to 'age up' photos of their missing child every year in the hope they may be seen and found. It was really sad. But it also made me wonder what would happen if I saw my own photo there.

In addition, I love detective novels and spent my teens inhaling them, especially Agatha Christie. I always wanted to write a detective novel, but with a fat detective who was not ashamed of their body. Being fat myself, I've always been interested in the portrayal and shaming of fat characters in books and on TV, where they are often relegated to the role of funny friend or sidekick, rarely the hero.

So these two things came together with this book. It started out as an adult detective novel told in third person from predominantly two characters' points of view. It was also set in the 80s, when it was easier to kidnap someone or disappear because government systems and police databases weren't linked and the internet and social media didn't exist. The story only became YA because one day I stood in the wrong line at a speed-dating session with publishers. The room was so crowded, I didn't realise I was standing in the YA line till I was about to pitch. So I quickly rejigged my 80s adult mystery pitch into a YA contemporary one and the publisher liked it, as did others. So then I had to rewrite my whole novel!

The characters in this story are not based on me, my family or friends, but there are some similarities that have inevitably crept in. I was raised by my grandparents and never knew who my father was (until very recently, but that's another story!). The mystery around my father wasn't a big drama for me, but it has clearly been in the back of my mind on some level for me to write this book!

## 4. Style

*Gus and the Missing Boy* is written in the first person, present tense. We see and experience the story through Gus's eyes in real time as he experiences it. This means we form a very immediate relationship with Gus, because we're inside his head and don't see the story from the direct viewpoint of any other character. Even when other characters are telling their version of events, it is Gus they are talking to.

This is a typical approach with many detective stories, where the detective interviews various suspects and pieces together the truth based on the suspects' testimonies. You don't typically see inside the suspects' minds in these types of stories, as that would likely reveal the culprit – rather defeating the mystery of the story!



## 5. Themes to discuss after finishing the book

### Friendship

- Is Gus a good friend to Shell and Kane, or is he too caught up in his own dramas to be the friend they deserve?
- Do Gus and Shell dismiss Kane's intelligence? Are they smug about being smarter than he is?
- The three of them show that friends can be quite different to each other. How are Gus, Kane and Shell different from each other? How are they similar?
- Gus is quite close to both Shell and Kane, but in different ways. How different are the ways that this closeness was formed?

### Identity

- Gus feels like he doesn't fit in and experiences anxiety. In what other ways do these feelings manifest?
- Shell is questioning her gender identity. Should she have confided her thoughts about gender with her family earlier?
- Kane feels as if Gus and Shell, but particularly Shell, only see his attractiveness. How would your friends ignoring your intelligence make you feel?
- Do you think that Gus will be able to accept the fact that he is actually Robin, or will he always feel like two different people?

### Self-harm

- There are depictions of cutting in this story. Why do you think doing something dangerous like this makes Gus feel 'better' and more 'in control'?
- Meg clearly knows about Gus's self-harm and has him seeing a psychologist. What else could she do?
- Shell and Kane also know about Gus's self-harming and actively try to stop him hurting himself, but what kind of support might they need?

### Anxiety

- Gus and Shell both see therapists and Gus is on anti-depressants. Do you or your friends have experience with this? How was that experience for you or them?
- Gus experiences guilt over surviving the car accident without a scratch, and also suffers from anxiety. What are some of the signs of Gus's anxiety? How does he try to manage and reduce these feelings?

### Being fat

- Gus and Shell are both fat and try to own this. Are there moments when they find this difficult?
- Do you think Gus and Shell should be proud of their bodies? Are you happy with your own body image? Describe your own relationship with body image. Is it healthy or unhealthy? Why?

### Kidnap

- Does Gus suspect Meg of lying about his past too quickly? Why do you think he might be jumping to a conclusion about this?
- Could there ever be a scenario where kidnapping could be the right thing to do? How would you justify a crime like this if you had to defend yourself?
- Why does it only take Gus and his friends a few days to solve a case that was unsolved for 12 years?

### Parenting

- What does being a mother really mean?

- In the end, do you think Meg was a good mother? What about Jane, and Mrs Crale?
- Meg wanted to give herself up to the police toward the end of the story. Was that the right thing to do, given this would leave Gus alone, and at risk of being sent to foster care?
- Gus has lots of happy memories of his father, and has trouble reconciling that with the fact that his dad kidnapped him. Do you think Mark/Tom is a good person? Why/why not?

### **Ethics**

- Gus obtains Meg's hair for a DNA test without her consent. Do you think this is an excusable action? Is it ever okay to do something without consent if it's in pursuit of the truth?
- Robin's kidnappers are revealed to have been under the impression that they were 'saving' him, because they thought he might have ended up in foster care. Do you think their actions are understandable? Are they reasonable? Are they excusable? Justify your answers with evidence from the text.
- There are a few instances where characters do something they know is wrong, with the goal of unearthing a much 'bigger' wrong. Why is the right thing such a grey area? Where would you draw the line if it were you investigating this case?
- True crime is hugely popular, with content creators all over the world presenting the stories and trauma experienced by victims, survivors, and family members of those affected by crimes to their audience. What do you think of this? Is it ethical to make money, as some people do, off of other people's stories? Is telling true crime stories any different from telling true stories that are uplifting?

### **Writing Techniques**

- Young adult stories are often (but not always) told from the main character's first person point of view. Did you like being inside Gus's head in this story? How different do you think your enjoyment of the book may have been if it had been also told from Shell's and/or Kane's point of view?
- How well has the author used clues about characters' personalities based on their descriptions? How else did the author reveal things about the characters without spelling them out?
- Crime writers need to tell a convincing story without revealing all their cards too early. How did the author drop information throughout the story? Did all of the clues give you the right information?
- In mystery and crime stories 'red herrings' (misleading clues) are often used to distract the reader from the truth. What red herrings did the author use in this story to hide the identity of the culprits?
- This book has a surprise reveal towards the end. Do you like plot twists like this? What other books have you read that have done this?

## **6. Discussion questions chapter by chapter**

### **Prologue**

- How does the prologue set up the story?
- Does this text draw you in? Why?

### **Chapter One**

- Shell and Kane are very different. Why do you think Gus is friends with two such different people?
- What was your instant reaction to the last line in this chapter?

### **Chapter Two**

- How do you think you would react to see a picture of yourself on a missing kids website? Would it be different to how Gus and Kane react?

- What are your thoughts on AI?

### **Chapter Three**

- What kind of mother do you think Meg is?
- What in this chapter tells you the most about her?

### **Chapter Four**

- Have you ever trawled through social media to find someone? How successful were you?
- Consider the possibility that someone was trying to find you online. How much would they find out about you, based on your profile/s?
- Do you think people are too open on social media? Why/why not?

### **Chapter Five**

- Shell is having a complex gender discussion with Gus. How well does he handle it?
- Is Meg's anger with Gus reasonable? Is it understandable?

### **Chapter Six**

- Is Meg's explanation to Gus believable? Why/why not?
- What does the cubbyhouse represent to Gus?
- Gus is anxious at the end of the chapter and turns to self-harm to control his feelings. What other coping mechanisms has he tried before this?

### **Chapter Seven**

- What do you think the message 'Bell' means?
- What are some hints about the flashback scene that signal things are not quite right?

### **Chapter Eight**

- Is Kane fat-shaming Gus here?
- What role do the memories of the footy and swimming lessons play in the story?

### **Chapter Nine**

- Do you agree with Shell's decision to accept the credit card, knowing she intends to use it for the 'wrong' reasons?
- Gus buys the DNA test online, with no problems. Do you think this is an issue? What are some possible problems with DNA testing being so readily available?

### **Chapter Ten**

- How does the incident in the tunnels inform the rest of the story?
- Do you agree with Dr Yamada's assessment of why Gus self-harms? Why/why not?

### **Chapter Eleven**

- Is Gus being a bad friend by asking Shell questions about gender? What would you do in this situation?

## **Chapter Twelve**

- Read the article about Robin's disappearance. What information does it give Gus? What is he still missing?
- Write your own version of the article, using what you've learned from the text so far.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

- Kane's identity seems to be connected to his sporting ability. Do you know someone who is like that? What would happen if they could no longer participate in their chosen sport/s?
- Are you surprised by the DNA test results?
- Have you ever been tempted to take a DNA test? Why?

## **Chapter Fourteen**

- Do you think it was ethical for Gus to take Meg's hair for a DNA test without telling her? Discuss.
- This is an important turning point in the story. Do you think Gus and Meg's relationship can be mended after this?

## **Chapter Fifteen**

- Gus and his friends all seem to drink alcohol to varying degrees. Do you think they're being safe?
- Is Gus selfish to not think of the impact of his actions on Kane?

## **Chapter Sixteen**

- Why does the author choose now to describe the night of the car accident? How does it help you understand Gus and Meg?
- Why do you think Gus didn't go to the police earlier with his suspicions about the Robin Winter case?
- Why don't the police take Gus seriously? How would you present Gus's story to police?

## **Chapter Seventeen**

- Why does Tom just play along with his boss? Do you think he's a passive person?
- Why does the author show Gus's humiliation over wetting his pants?
- What does this flashback scene tell you about Tom, Meg, and Gus, and their relationships with each other?

## **Chapter Eighteen**

- If you were going on a big road trip, where would you go?
- What song would be top of your road trip playlist?

## **Chapter Nineteen**

- Is an old lady being a nosy neighbour a stereotype? Why would the author choose to use a stereotype in this instance?
- What do you think of Mrs Crale's story about the three visitors to the house the day Robin was kidnapped? How does it change your perception of the case?
- Do you think the police believed Mrs Crale? If you were investigating, would you think Mrs Crale was a reliable witness? Why/why not?

## **Chapter Twenty**

- 'Big news becomes smaller news and then, after a while, it ceases to be news at all.' (page 141) Do you agree with this statement?

### **Chapter Twenty-one**

- What do you think has happened to Detective Firelli?

### **Chapter Twenty-two**

- What do you think about Kane's self-deprecating statement 'I can talk sport with the guys and flash some muscle at the girls'? (page 149). What does it tell you about his character?
- How are the dynamics changing between Gus, Shell and Kane in this chapter?

### **Chapter Twenty-three**

- Do you agree with Shell's and Kane's warning to Gus that the kidnapper may still be in town and unhappy that they are looking into the case?
- Are you surprised that Gus has only just started considering the consequences of solving the case? Why do you think he's ignored this reality?
- How strong a suspect is Dr Christow? What evidence supports this?

### **Chapter Twenty-four**

- How does Sophie's house reveal her character? Use examples from the text.
- The rumour that Sophie can't have children is painful to her. Are women still judged on their ability to have children? Discuss.
- Kane has been consistently distracted since the trio got to Bellanta, and has been texting someone frequently. Who do you think he's messaging? Why have you chosen this person?

### **Chapter Twenty-five**

- Have you ever consulted a psychic? What happened? Did you believe what they said?
- Do you think Anna has true powers, or is she a fraud who made a good guess? Do you believe anybody is truly a psychic?

### **Chapter Twenty-six**

- When Gus discovers that the mystery person Kane has been texting is Meg, he feels betrayed. Do you think what Kane has done is a breach of trust? Why/why not?
- Detective Firelli tells Gus some harsh truths about Jane Winter. How does this affect him?
- What do you think about the end of the chapter? How do you think cliffhangers affect the way you read stories?

### **Chapter Twenty-seven**

- Why is Detective Firelli so dismissive of the trio's investigative efforts? Do you think it's fair that he doesn't take them seriously?
- Did you suspect that Gus's dad Tom might actually be Mark Reynolds? What in the text made you think this?

### **Chapter Twenty-eight**

- How do you think Gus is coping with all of these revelations? Are you surprised that he's reacting in the way that he is?
- What do you think of Shell's plan to confront the suspects with Gus? Is it a good plan? Do you agree with Kane that it is too dangerous?

### Chapter Twenty-nine

- What do you think of the interaction between Sophie, Anna and Dr Christow? Does it make you suspect one of them more than the others? Why?
- Was Mrs Crale's revelation a surprise to you? What does it reveal about the case?

### Chapter Thirty

- Does Mrs Crale's story about Robin being hurt justify her and Mark's actions?
- Do you feel sympathy for Mark, given his traumatic experiences with foster care? Was this the best way to protect Robin from being taken into care?
- The chapter ends with Gus in the creek. What do you think happens next?

### Chapter Thirty-one

- Did Kane saving Gus surprise you? Do his secret messages to Meg make more sense now?
- Do you like the way Shell and Kane get angry with the Crales for what they did both to Gus and to Jane? Do you agree with them?

### Chapter Thirty-two

- What did you think would happen when Gus returned home and confronted Meg?
- Given Meg looked like the most likely culprit earlier in the story, how do you feel about her character now?
- Gus wonders to himself, 'was I stolen or saved?' (page 196). What do you think the answer is, and why?

### Chapter Thirty-three

- Gus gets to miss the rest of the school year. Would you like that to happen to you?
- Dr Yamada asks Gus some tough questions. Do you think he goes too far?
- Why does the author have Gus talk about Robin like he is a separate person?

### Chapter Thirty-four

- Does Gus and the others destroying the cubbyhouse make sense to you? Do you think it would be cathartic?
- Why do you think the author sets the final scene at a fairground with a Ferris wheel?
- Who do you think put the ad on the website? Why?

## 7. Activities

- Using the clues Gus collects online, through his search at the State Library, and in the *Bellanta Courier* archives, create your own version of his timeline and crime board. Are there any unanswered questions raised by your version of the investigation? How would you go about finding the answers to these questions?
- Consider the information included in the original article Gus finds. Do you think the article is unbiased? Why/why not? Thinking broadly, are newspaper articles usually unbiased, or are their authors trying to sway their readers to think a certain way? Why do you think this is?
- Using the descriptions provided of Gus, Shell, Kane, Meg, and Detective Firelli, draw each of their characters. Compare your pictures with those of your friends. In what way are they similar? In what way are they different? How much of the way these characters look has the author left to the readers' imagination?
- In Chapter Twenty-nine, Detective Firelli rounds up his three main suspects and confronts them together. This technique is a common feature of crime stories, and is called a denouement. Discuss other media (books,



movies, TV shows, etc.) that also feature a denouement scene. What do you think the purpose of a scene like this serves? Does it add or take away from the story?

## 8. Key curriculum links

### Learning Area, English Year 7–10

‘These texts explore themes of interpersonal relationships and ethical dilemmas within real-world and fictional settings and represent a variety of perspectives.’ (ACARA)

### **General capabilities**

#### **Ethical Understanding**

‘In the Australian Curriculum: English, students develop ethical understanding as they study the social, moral and ethical positions and dilemmas presented in a range of texts. They explore how ethical principles affect the behaviour and judgement of imagined characters in texts and the real-life experiences of those involved in similar issues and events.’ (ACARA)

#### **Critical and Creative Thinking**

‘English ... In discussion, students develop critical thinking as they share personal responses and express preferences for specific texts, state and justify their points of view and respond to the views of others.’ (ACARA)