



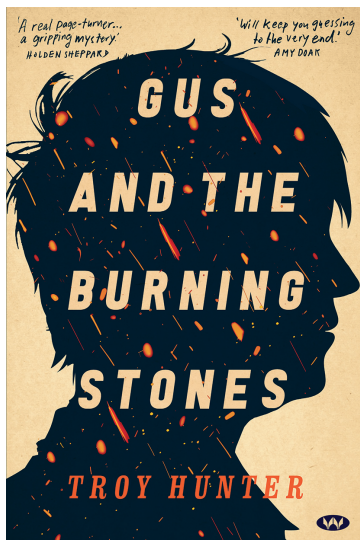
# Wakefield Press

## TEACHERS' NOTES

### Gus and the Burning Stones

By Troy Hunter

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## 1. Introduction to *Gus and the Burning Stones*

It's been over six months since amateur sleuth Gus Green solved his first real-life case, and started investigating his past. When he receives an anonymous message telling him that his missing birth mother Jane can be found at the mysterious 'Circle', an off-grid community based around an ancient stone circle, he knows he has to find out more.

At The Circle, Gus and his friends Shell and Kane's investigation seems over before it starts: none of the strange people living there know Jane – or so they say. But when a brutal storm traps the friends at the community, and a dead body is discovered, they quickly realise that there's a new case to solve. A murderer walks among them, and everyone has a motive.

The trio find themselves in a race against time to unmask the killer before they become targets themselves. But why were they lured here? What is the power of the stone circle? And how on earth does all of this connect to Jane?

## 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. His first Gus novel, *Gus and the Missing Boy*, was shortlisted for the Australian Crime Writers 2024 Ned Kelly Awards – Best Debut, and the BAD Sydney Crime Writers 2025 Danger Awards. He is also the co-host of the Queer Writes Sessions podcast.



## 3. Inspiration behind the novel

*Gus and the Missing Boy* 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.

Once *Gus and the Missing Boy* was published, and people seemed to enjoy it, I was keen to write another Gus story to bring these friends together again to solve a new crime. I had this image in my head of a boat on fire in a storm and I have always had a strong fascination with stone circles, so these two things came together to start to form a story. I also wanted to tell a story where a murder just happened – unlike the first book – so that there was real tension and immediate danger for the characters. Lastly, I like what is known as a 'closed circle mystery' where there is a small group that is isolated from the outside world, meaning one of them must be the murderer.

So, *Gus and the Burning Stones* was forged from these things all coming together.

## 4. Style

*Gus and the Burning Stones* 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

- Gus, Shell and Kane show that friends can be quite different to each other. What differences between them are the most obvious? What about their similarities?
- Gus is quite close to both Shell and Kane, but in different ways. What are the key differences between their closeness?

### Identity

- Shell is questioning her gender identity and her potential asexuality. In what ways do you think this would affect Shell? How would you support someone questioning their identity like this?
- Kane sees his physical attractiveness as his defining trait. What do you think influences this feeling in people? How does social media play a role in this?
- Gus struggles with the idea that Meg, the person he thinks of as his mother, isn't his birth mother. Do you think that Gus will be able to forgive Jane and accept her properly into his life? How do you think Meg and Jane's feelings about motherhood will change as they get used to each other?

### Mental Health

- Gus mentions his struggles with self-harm throughout the story. While he hasn't self-harmed for a while, he still keeps his Swiss Army Knife with him at all times. Why do you think he keeps the knife with him? Do you think this is holding him back from breaking out of the cycle of self-harm?
- 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?
- What are some of the signs of Gus's anxiety? How does he try to manage and reduce these feelings?
- Do you think Gus's work with Dr Yamada is helping him navigate his anxiety? Why/why not?
- When it's revealed that Nash struggles with pyromania, most of the residents turn on him, and on Cath. Do you think their reactions are justified? Was Cath right to keep something like this secret, even after the fire was deemed suspicious?
- Both Gus and Nash use destructive or harmful coping mechanisms as a way of dealing with their issues. Can you understand why they might react in the ways that they do? How could they better direct their feelings?

### Body image

- Gus and Shell are both fat and try to own this. Do you think they should be proud of their bodies? Why/why not?
- Kane works very hard on maintaining his physique, and gets a lot of validation from social media. Knowing what you do about the lengths he has gone to achieve this physique, do you think that he should be proud of his body?
- Describe your own relationship with body image. Is it healthy or unhealthy? Why?
- To what extent do you think social media affects its users' relationships with body image and self worth? Is it just social media that makes people feel this way, or are there other factors at play?

### Crime

- 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 traumatic 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? How different do you think your enjoyment of the book may have been if it had also been told from Shell's and/or Kane's point of view? What if it was *only* told from Shell's or Kane's point of view?
- Showing not telling is an important consideration for writers. Besides physical descriptions of the characters, what other clues about the way these characters exist in the world have been left throughout the story? How effectively has the author shown you what these characters are like without overtly telling you?
- Crime writers need to tell a convincing story without revealing all their cards too early. How effectively did the author drop information throughout the story? Did you pick up on all of the clues left? Did all of the clues give you the right information you needed to solve the crime?
- 'Red herrings' (misleading clues) are often used by mystery/crime writers 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 several surprise reveals 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? What are you expecting will happen based on this section?
- Does this text draw you in? Why/why not?

### Chapter One

- How would you react if you were sent an anonymous message like Gus? Do you think he can trust the message, or the person who sent it?
- Do you wish your school had its own detective agency? What kind of crimes or mysteries do you think would be investigated?

### Chapter Two

- Do you like the honest relationship Gus has with his mother?
- If you were Gus's mum, would you let him go and investigate this remote community without you? Why do you think Meg lets him go?

### Chapter Three

- Have you ever visited a place that was off the grid like The Circle? Was it similar or different to the descriptions in the book?
- How does the atmosphere of this chapter set up the mystery to come?

### Chapter Four

- What are your first thoughts about the people who live at The Circle?
- When the residents at The Circle say they don't know who Jane is, why do you think Gus doesn't believe them? Do you agree with his suspicions, or is he just imagining things?

### Chapter Five

- What is your first impression of Simon Walker?
- Can you guess what he may know about Gus's birth mother, Jane?

## **Chapter Six**

- What do we learn about Shell and Kane as they interact with Greta and Maxine respectively?
- Have you ever eavesdropped or covertly watched your friends? Did you find out anything you weren't supposed to? How did listening to a private conversation make you feel?

## **Chapter Seven**

- Why is Nash stand-offish with Gus?
- Greta is terrified of lightning. Do you understand her fears? Do you share them?

## **Chapter Eight**

- We learn that Kane likes to show off his body on social media. What are your thoughts about people who do this?
- What are some of the coping mechanisms Gus's therapist suggests he use to deal with his anxiety?

## **Chapter Nine**

- Have you heard of stone circles before? Can you name a real life example of a stone circle?
- What do you think the significance is of the painting of the stones?

## **Chapter Ten**

- Why do you think Greta is so protective of the stone circle?
- Is the way Maxine flirts with Kane acceptable, or is it inappropriate? Why?

## **Chapter Eleven**

- How could a boat be on fire during such an intense storm?
- Does the last line of this chapter reveal to you whose body they have found?

## **Chapter Twelve**

- Did you find the discovery of the dead body upsetting? What do you think your reaction in this situation would be?
- Did everyone react to the body in the way you expected them to? Did anyone react suspiciously?

## **Chapter Thirteen**

- Do you think Gus and Shell are right to assume this was murder? Or do you think Kane is right about it being an accident?
- When Kane hides Gus's knife, does that change the way you look at him? Why do you think he goes behind Gus's back to hide it, rather than speaking to him about his concerns?

## **Chapter Fourteen**

- Does the timeline in this chapter help you understand what happened, and when? How would you keep track of information, clues and movements if you were investigating?
- Tobias produces a strange-looking gizmo and suggests that the fire might have been deliberately lit. Do you agree with him? Do you believe that he actually found the gadget on the boat? Why would he lie?

### **Chapter Fifteen**

- As the search of the cabins and the property began, what did you expect them to find?
- As they search the cabins, Gus notes that everyone has 'such distinct spaces' (page 84). What do the interiors of each cabin reveal to you about the person who lives there?

### **Chapter Sixteen**

- After searching all of the cabins, the search party returns to the houseboat for another look. Why?
- Tobias has searched the houseboat twice now, both times by himself. Why do you think he now suggests that they leave the jetty and the houseboat alone until the police arrive? Do you find this strange?

### **Chapter Seventeen**

- Have you ever stayed at a caravan park? Was it similar to the one described in the book?
- What was your reaction to the last line of this chapter?

### **Chapter Eighteen**

- Why does Gus blurt out, 'It must be one of us!' (page 94) at this moment in the story?
- Were you surprised by Nash's revelation about Cath and Simon at the end of this chapter?

### **Chapter Nineteen**

- What does Cath picking at the threads on her jumper symbolise?
- Do you believe Nash's reason for going to the boat that night? Why/why not?

### **Chapter Twenty**

- Do you understand the significance of trying to find First Nations people to consult about the stone circle?
- How do you think you would react if you had to be in a house knowing that there was a dead body in the next room?

### **Chapter Twenty-one**

- Gus pretending to bump the toolbox to access a knife is sneaky. How does this act make you feel about him? Does it change your previous assessment of him?
- Do you feel sorry for Greta when you discover that she may not be as good at fixing things as she wants people to think she is? Why do you think she might pretend to be more capable than she actually is?

### **Chapter Twenty-two**

- What does Maxine drinking at 11 am say about her character and her current state of mind?
- Does hearing Maxine's story about her life before The Circle change how you think about her?

### **Chapter Twenty-three**

- Why is Gus talking to his mum important at this point in the story?
- Was finding the photo of Jane a shock to you? How do you think the picture got into their cabin? Why do you think it was placed there?

### **Chapter Twenty-four**

- Does Tobias asking Gus questions about Jane seem suspicious? What do you think his interest in Gus's relationship with his birth mother might mean?
- Can you understand why Gus loses his temper with everyone?

### **Chapter Twenty-five**

- What do you think Gus's dream might mean?
- What did you think was causing Kane's sleepwalking? Did the discovery of the steroids shock you?

### **Chapter Twenty-six**

- Why do you think Greta reveals the secret about Nash now and not earlier?
- How would you feel if you were Nash and someone had blurted out a secret about you to a group of people?
- Do you agree with everyone's reaction to finding out about Nash's struggles with pyromania? Do you think it was fair that Cath kept something like this a secret for this long?

### **Chapter Twenty-seven**

- Do you agree with the way the trio evaluates everyone according to motive and opportunity?
- Who is your lead suspect at this point in the story? What evidence supports your theory?

### **Chapter Twenty-eight**

- Simon Walker's watch is worth a small fortune. Who do you think might have stolen it?
- Is financial gain the only motive someone might have to steal the watch? What other reasons might someone have for stealing it?
- Gus thinks that the thief and the killer are two different people, but Tobias disagrees. Whose side are you on?

### **Chapter Twenty-nine**

- How does the arrival of the police change the dynamic of the story?
- Are you interested in the detail around police procedures?

### **Chapter Thirty**

- Do you think the missing watch is an important clue or a red herring? What makes you think this?
- Do you agree with Shell that Tobias is a strong suspect, given he is responsible for a lot of the information they are relying on?

### **Chapter Thirty-one**

- Does the jerry can of petrol make Greta a strong suspect?
- Do you think the petrol was left there by Greta, or was it planted by somebody else? What motive might someone have to plant the jerry can in Greta's cabin?

### **Chapter Thirty-two**

- What does Kane's secret Instagram account reveal about his headspace? Do you think it's healthy to share so much of yourself, and your body, on social media?
- Does the photo of Maxine make her a strong suspect? Why do you think she was heading down to the jetty?

### **Chapter Thirty-three**

- What did you think Gus would find when he started digging in the garden? Does it match up with what he actually discovered?
- What do you think of Gus's curiosity about cabin four – John's cabin? Do you think it's strange that Tobias insists that the trio can't search the cabin in John's absence?

### **Chapter Thirty-four**

- How does the discovery of the contract change your assessment of Cath's and Nash's motives?
- Cath hasn't been honest with the residents at The Circle about her plans for the property. What else might she have been dishonest about? Do you trust her less now?

### **Chapter Thirty-five**

- Tobias is furious that the stone circle is part of the property being sold in the contract. Why is he so insistent that the stones be protected?
- How do you think Greta and Maxine would react if they found out that Cath had signed the sale contract?
- Do you think Shell crossed a line by stealing the key to cabin four?

### **Chapter Thirty-six**

- Why do you think Shell chose this moment to discuss her asexuality? How could Gus have handled the situation better?
- What does the discovery of the wall of photos and articles tell us about the occupant of cabin four?

### **Chapter Thirty-seven**

- Gus announces he knows who the killer is, but stops short of revealing them when he feels himself being watched. Who did you think was watching through the window?
- Out of Gus, Kane and Shell, who reacted best to the danger at hand? How would you react if you found yourself in a burning building?

### **Chapter Thirty-eight**

- Did you guess the significance of the clock? Do you think that the author left enough clues throughout the story to make this reveal believable?
- Despite the terrible results of her actions, do you understand why Greta did what she did?
- Who did you think the woman in the orange coat was?

### **Chapter Thirty-nine**

- How do you feel about the trio's mums arriving at The Circle?
- When Gus's mum Meg realises that Gus has finally found Jane, how do you think she might be feeling?

### **Chapter Forty**

- If you read *Gus and the Missing Boy*, can you remember the significance of the instant noodles?
- The conversation between Gus and Jane is awkward and uncomfortable, but Gus doesn't initially intend for it to be that way. Can you understand where his anger comes from?

### **Chapter Forty-one**

- Does Maxine's desire to track down her daughter justify taking Simon's watch?
- Why do you think Sutton ignores the discovery of the watch?

### **Chapter Forty-two**

- What do you think will happen with Jane and Gus now that they've reconnected? How do you think Meg and Jane will cope with this new situation?
- Do you think there was a spark between Gus and Nash? Could they have a future together?



## 7. Activities

- Using the descriptions provided of Gus, Shell and Kane, draw each of their characters. Compare your pictures with those of your friends. How much of the way these characters look has the author left to the readers' imagination?
- This book has five main suspects who are all trapped at a single location. This is called a 'closed circle' mystery, a common feature in crime stories. Discuss other media – books, movies, TV shows, etc. – that employ this technique. Do you think knowing one of them must be the murder adds or detracts from the story?
- Looking at the methods the trio use to evaluate whether each of the suspects had a motive and/or opportunity, think about what other ways they could have evaluated who may have been the murderer.
- Gus, Kane and Shell each take turns in leading the questioning of their suspects. Discuss the ways in which their approaches are similar, and compare the ways that they differ. Who is the most effective investigator? What sets them apart from the others?
- Write down a list of questions you would have asked each of the five suspects. What do you think their answers would have been? How do you think this information might have helped, or hindered, Gus, Kane and Shell?
- The news of a homicide in a small town like Walliss would be enormous, especially when you consider that Simon Walker was well-known around town. Imagine you are a local journalist arriving at The Circle as Greta is being arrested. Write a newspaper article reporting on the details of the crime. What information would be included? Do you think local reporters would focus on different aspects of the case than reporters from Melbourne might? Why do you think this is?
- Maxine's theft of Simon's watch is motivated by a desire to reconnect with her daughter. Despite being a police officer, Sutton ignores this crime, and doesn't report it to her superiors, effectively letting Maxine get away with a crime. Is it alright to do something objectively or legally wrong in the service of a good and/or noble cause? Break into teams and present an argument either in the affirmative or negative.

## 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)