

‘Butterflies’ and ‘The Cave’ by Susanne Gervay

Quality literature can assist in exploring self-identity, influencing positive behaviours, and developing critical thinking that can help youth deal with their emotions and experiences.

Young people are on their pathway towards adulthood with the multitude of choices offered by a democratic society. On this pathway they are continually testing, developing, challenging the central question of youth “Who Am I?” This question has become the blueprint today for youth literature with its insatiable exploration of search for identity.

Youth is a time of enormous change – physical, sexual, intellectual. It is that transitional period where a young person seeks independence from family, adjusts to sexual maturation, establishes peer relationships, is faced with vocational decisions, develops a philosophy of life, spiritual and moral beliefs, searches for individuality and a place in their community. The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson highlighted that it is a time of intense egocentricity as young people seek to find who they are. Youth can move into dangerous pathways, experiment with cultural, ethical, populist issues, enter into adult decisions during this time.

The journey from childhood to adulthood can be perilous, challenging and exciting, filled with experimentation and questioning. It is a time when young people develop who they are, their sense of social justice and their place in a democratic society.

Well written issue based literature is honest and confronting as it explores the gamut of human emotions and responses ranging from family break-up, AIDS, relationships, war, dislocation, abuse, love, sexuality, racism.

The Cave is a YA novel, which was researched extensively as I sought to reveal youth male culture today. The narrative drive is a survival camp. The culture is youth with everything from dance parties, sexuality, peer group influence to drugs and tattooing. The male adolescent life is exposed with all its humour, football socks, late night drinking, mateship, leadership, relationships, violence, grief. The challenge is thrown to young people – Who are they? Where are they going?

Carole Kayrooz PhD, MAPS, Director of Postgraduate Studies, Communication and Education, University of Canberra has written:-

The Cave is a gritty story of courage and hope for those in the passage between youth and adulthood. Both compassionate and confronting, Susanne Gervay takes us on a journey, eight days’ camping with the hero Knox and his mates including Fat George, Bennie and Jones, and the evil Watts.

This journey was eight days of descending into fear, exhaustion, ravines and rivers, each in their own way carving out a sense of self-knowing and mateship; eight days of reverie where past and present ghosts comfort and perplex. Ultimately, in the cave, Knox comes to a sense of responsibility and authenticity that is more powerful than the mystery of the Rave Party or Watts metal tip leather boots.

As a psychologist, I recognize the private maelstrom engulfing many young adults, in-transit between powerlessness and independence. As an educationalist, I appreciate the groups' ambivalence towards their two guides, Seaton and Sarah, and towards a society that alienates and fragments. As a reader, Susanne Gervay compels us, like the river that is part of her story, towards the rancid murky Cave, the final place of initiation.

This is an epic story beautifully written with clear spare prose and the ability to go right to the heart of young males in modern society.

Butterflies is also a confronting YA novel which explores the issue of burns on a child, family and community. Dr Hugh Martin Head of the Burn Unit at The Children's Hospital Westmead has said in *Butterflies*:-

Every survivor has a story. Often the story is of interest, and even more often instructive. "Butterflies" is the story of a burn survivor, and is both interesting and instructive. It explores the complex areas of the emotional impact of a burn on the individual and family while giving insight into the world of hospitals, patients and doctors. It traces the development of the personality from insecurity and relative isolation to a healthier level of self esteem that enables the individual to form balanced relationships with family and friends. It shows how the inner person can triumph over a preoccupation with surface scars and know that basic values of commitment, caring and trust are more important than the texture of the skin.

"Butterflies" has relevance outside the narrow circle of burn survivors and their families. It shows the ebb and flow of emotions that affect us all, particularly in the transition between childhood and adulthood, and how parenting and family life make these bearable.

Those of us who are involved in the world of burns know how survivors need help from time to time, but slowly develop a depth of character and an inner strength which is rarely seen in others. Like tempering steel, the process of passing through the fire helps make a person of exceptional quality. "Butterflies" captures these subtleties for the reader, and gives a stunning insight into a difficult topic.

Powerful youth literature can tackle issues in a significant way, opening youth to a story journey where they can test and participate in choices and decision-making. It can facilitate them in discovering the essential question – Who Am I?

Questions to Explore in 'Butterflies' & 'The Cave'

- Gender differences
- The journey from childhood to adulthood
- Leadership
- Courage
- Aggression
- Sexuality
- Friendship
- Peer group
- Communication
- Independence
- Aspirations
- Self esteem
- Spirituality
- Why am I here?
- How do world issues affect youth?
- Power versus powerlessness
- Justice
- Personal challenges

Sample segments and discussion points..

The Cave

War? What does it mean?

. He was only twenty years old. Grandpa said that half the airmen didn't come home.

"Lancasters. They could really fly. More than 4000 kilometres in one go, carrying a 7,000 pound bomb load. Lancs. They were fast. 460 kilometres per hour. That might not seem fast to you Sam, but it was then." Grandpa had told me about his famous Lancs before – the airmen, their missions, air battles. Sometimes he repeated himself but he always added something new, explained something more. "We could go higher than 24,000 feet." He moved back and forward sanding the glory box smooth. "Not much higher than that." He stopped to look at the smoothness of his work. I ran my hand over it. "There were always three gunners. I was one of them, sitting in a perspex bubble with a machine gun on the side of the plane. The gunners were the first target. Had to knock us out. The noise was deafening." Grandpa waited. He looked at me for a while. "I want to tell you this, because I'd didn't know it when I was a boy back then." He pointed to the familiar old black and white photograph hanging on the workshop wall. "That was my first Lanc. The first crew I flew with." There were seven airmen in the photo, three wearing peak airmen caps, two with pilot's hats and two with no hats and their hair slicked back. "They were my mates." He pointed to the second pilot and the Navigator. Then Grandpa waited as if gulping for air. "I didn't like the skipper at first," he pointed to a tall, lean man with a pilot's hat. "Jack Dawson. Came from Western Australia from a big station. Ran sheep. I thought he thought too much of himself. He was university educated. He didn't talk

much. He stood apart from the rest of us. He'd already seen action in France." Grandpa stopped his work on the glory box and stood in front of his black and white photograph.

"Our mission was Cologne. Night bombing. The Lanc was fully loaded with bombs. There were German searchlights looking for us. Blue lights that attached to you so that we were targets for the twin-engined Messerschmitt 110's. Hated those blue lights and the Messerschmitts. Deadly. Then there was the ground cannon. There was so much noise and smoke, planes down, bombing, fire. Jack took down our Lanc to 2000 feet, unloading bombs onto cities of people and falling buildings. Flak struck the Lanc, tore the guts out of the side. A shell exploded in the cockpit shattering the windscreen and the second pilot's leg but it was Jack who got the full blast of it." Grandpa put his heavy carpenter hands in front of his face as if to hide the image. "A shell ripped away his right eye and the skin of his face." It was a while before he started speaking again. "We were screaming and firing and trying to fix the damage. Jack lost consciousness and we plummeted 800 feet before he pulled the plane out of the dive. I don't know how he did. Even in that much pain, coughing blood, Jack has this strength. He was losing blood. A lot of blood and his face was half torn away. Bone and flesh and eyes.

Jack held that plane level, but we were low, lurching in the sky. Flak was still hitting us but Jack held onto that plane, crossing the English Channel in the dark. We couldn't land. Not enough fuel. Too much damage. One gunner was dead. We reached the English coastline. Jack could hardly speak. "Parachutes. Get out of here." There was so much blood. "An order."

We left Jack. Jumped. They found his body weeks afterwards, brought in with the tide on a beach.

Grandpa was careful not to judge people too quickly after that. Grandpa told me that war is not brave, but men can be brave in war and in life. (Chapter 14)

Why are we here?

A shadow makes me look up curiously. A hawk glides in the air currents before disappearing between mountains. Wish I was a hawk or an eagle. They don't have to climb the Chimney to see the world. I look down at everyone from my boulder. It's a strange feeling. We're like ants on a tiny mountain top, with all those monumental gullies and landscapes behind. How long would it have taken rivers to cut away those mountains? Millions and millions of years. There is this life here and it's not us. Eagles, wallabies, echidnas, possums, spiders ... and bush. Amazing bush. Aborigines wandered through this landscape. But this is more than them, more than human beings. It just is. I don't get why we matter, why I matter. Why I feel important sometimes and at other times, like nothing. I don't understand why we feel so much and do what we do. Grandpa said we're part of it and that's why. God's plan. I try not to think of the big picture because I get lost. I try to understand the little picture so that I can find my way. (Chapter 9)

Girlfriends

The guys are jealous of me. It is Laura. They won't admit it, but what they want is a girlfriend. One night stands are okay but they usually happen at a drunken party. You hardly remember it and afterwards you have to start hunting again. A girlfriend is different. She's someone you can talk to, muck about with, kiss, go further, lots further. Naked is good. Internet porno sites, magazines and dirty jokes are a bit boring when compared to the real thing. A girlfriend. Some guys hang around me because they think it will rub off. Like getting a girlfriend is contagious. Maybe if they didn't use lines like "I like you. Do you want to screw?" or "I think of you when I masturbate" or "Has anyone told you that you have great tits?" they might have a chance. Jones could get away with it if he wanted to, since he's captain of the first football. But not normal guys. They are fishing with the wrong bait. You have just got to have the nerve to talk to a girl about things that are real and see if she will keep talking to you. There is hope after that.

I have been practicing on Mum for years. When I want something, like a lift to school or some money to take Laura to the cinema, I tell her about school and sports, but the masterpiece is the compliment. "Your hair looks really pretty today, Mum." Mum knows it is a con job, but she still laughs and I usually get the lift and some money.

There is no Mum to con here. There's no Laura, but there are plenty of idiots. I look back and see Robbo walking behind with Watts. He is wearing the same army boots, gear and Marine style hair cut as Watts. Robbo isn't very bright. Bottom grade in all his subjects. Watts is in the bottom grade too, but he is there for other reasons. He's such a loser. (Chapter 6)

Butterflies

First Date

The afternoon seems long and Katherine keeps looking at the white faced clock. She serves an old lady Earl Grey tea. It gets busy then. After she gives the girl with a nose ring a banana smoothie, she notices it's already five o'clock. She starts cleaning up. At five-thirty, she locks the doors. Her pay is left in the till in an envelope. A shiver runs down her back as she opens the till and puts the notes in her purse.

Independence.

The cook's clashing of pots and plates echoes through the tiled cafe floor. Katherine gets ready for her first date - the green top, make-up, perfume. *I'm nervous. I never thought anyone would ever ask me out. Does my hair cover my face? Do I look all right? I don't. Wish Rachel was here. She'd tell me if I look all right. Mum always says I'm beautiful which is useless.* Katherine talks to the art deco mirror that hangs behind the cappuccino machine. *Why is William taking me out anyway? He's that good looking, he could ask anyone. I bet he won't turn up. No, that's stupid. He'll turn up because Greg's his friend. He doesn't like me. He didn't mean to ask me out. How could he be so cruel? I'm not going. When Jessie comes, I'll say I've got a cold. She'll just have to go without me.*

There's a knock on the cafe's closed door. Jessie's forehead is pressed against the glass. *You're early. It's only 5.45.* Katherine unlocks the door. Greg's standing behind Jessie and William's behind him. *Panic.*

"Are you ready, Katherine?"

"Yes." Katherine calls out to the cook that she's going.

"Right," echoes from the kitchen.

William stands awkwardly next to Greg. His hands are in his pockets. *Am I supposed to go up to him? What am I supposed to do?* Jessie threads her arm through Katherine's. "What movie do you want to see?"

That is Greg's cue to say he wants to see *Batman* and Jessie's to argue that she'd like to see a "meaningful" film. "Batman's meaningful. He always gets the bad guys."

"Sure." Jessie's laughing. She unthreads her arm from Katherine's as she gets into Greg's car. William and Katherine sit in the back seat. *Thank God for movies.* They talk about films. Katherine relaxes a little and William takes his hands out of his pockets. She glances at his eyes to check. *Hazel. I love hazel eyes.*

They end up seeing *Batman*. Katherine screams in the frightening parts and William takes her hand. Then he doesn't let it go. *Your hand is so big, sort of rough. Is that what men's hands are like?* She glances at him as the Batmobile races through Gotham City. *My stomach feels like butterflies. William. I really love your name and your hands.*

"You owe me coffee and cake after forcing me to see that, Greg," Jessie complains as they walk down the red carpeted stairs out of the cinema.

"Come on, you have to admit the special effects were fantastic. Virtual reality is..."

"I know, fantastic." Jessie puts her arm through Greg's. "You're my crazy computer fanatic."

The cinema complexes ooze people into the street, everyone shoving as groups move one way or another. William takes Katherine's hand again. "Don't want you to get lost." They follow Jessie and Greg until the crowds ease and they can wander slowly past the shops which are still open at eleven - book shops, music shops, cafes, game arcades with machines blaring colours and action. The scent of coffee draws them to a window layered with glass shelves. White meringues are piled high into a pyramid. Smooth dark chocolate covers the sache torte. Cherries and rich cream seep from the chocolate Bavarian. Thick lemon frosting layers the orange and poppyseed cake. "Lemon meringue pie for me," Jessie announces.

"Greedy."

They sit at a table inside. "I'll share if you're all nice to me."

They eat lemon meringue pie and chocolate cake and drink frothy cappuccino while dissecting the technology involved in creating Batman and virtual reality. Greg and Jessie get caught up in talking about the latest computers.

“Do you want some more chocolate cake?” William asks.

Katherine shakes her head. “Are you studying a lot now?”

“I’m supposed to be, but I keep thinking about after the exams, when I’m going North. I spend too much time at the beach.”

“I like the beach. I’m thinking of doing something in the surf. Maybe, Life-Saving,” but Katherine doesn’t want to talk about herself or the little she knows about Life-Saving. She pushes William’s conversation into surfing stories of waxed boards in big swells, riding too close to rocks and cliff faces, searching for the special wave, the left-hand tubes on a reef break. His hazel eyes glint with green and brown flashes as he talks about it. But it isn’t bragging. It’s something else, something to do with chasing the surf, catching that wave. Katherine hardly understands his freedom, but she senses the liberation of streets without footpaths, lawns that are just bush, wild gardens of native flowers. *I want yellow wattle. Kookaburras. Golden butterflies.*

“The guys and I just stack our gear into a car, usually mine, and we go.”

You’re lucky. No mother telling you what to do. No hospitals. Just your mates. I bet you drink beer. I want to drink beer. Katherine looks at her watch. Eleven-thirty. “I have to be home by midnight.” She reaches into her bag to pay. “I’ve got money now that I work,” she announces.

“Well, keep it. We’re paying.” William stands.

“That doesn’t seem fair.”

“Next time you girls can pay. That’s right, isn’t it Greg?”

“Next time.”

Greg and Jessie wait in the car as William walks Katherine to the door. She doesn’t put the key into the lock because she knows her mother will be in the lounge room waiting for her, listening for the key. “I had a good time, William.”

“Me too.” He brushes her hair away from her face making her instinctively shudder. He bends his head towards her. She pulls her hair back over her face wanting to hide when his lips touch hers. *Sweet. You taste so sweet. Chocolate and coffee.* She doesn’t resist. He presses harder and she opens her mouth a little. His tongue presses into her mouth and it feels warm and tender. Then she closes her lips.

She puts the key in the lock. Turns around to watch him walk to the car, then turns away and goes inside. Her mother is watching television. An old Judy Garland movie. She’s been crying and her eyes are red. “Did you have a nice time?”

“Yes, Mum. We saw *Batman*.” Her mother starts to ask questions but Katherine interrupts. “I’m tired. I want to go to bed. Goodnight, Mum.”

“Of course, Bambino. We will talk in the morning. You go to your bed.”

“Goodnight, Mum.” Katherine shuts her bedroom door.

She changes into her nightie, gets comfortable under the covers, holds Pup. “I’m seventeen and I’ve been kissed. I’m not the Beast tonight. Not tonight.” (Chapter 9)

Dependence versus Independence

Katherine half listens to Rachel’s chatter about her technician’s course, work and promises that she’ll have a great time at the dance. The brown butterfly leaves the white sheet to flutter through the garden of marigolds and sweet smelling jasmine. *Brown butterfly, brown butterfly, you’re protected tonight in my mother’s garden. Am I protected too?*

Swollen eyelids shut tight. Head shaven bare. The woman strokes the baby’s face. A seven year old girl holds onto the woman’s skirt. A plastic tube feeds into the baby’s nose and a drip is taped onto her arm. A catheter empties urine into a bag. Her arms are in splints. Her small body wrapped in gauze. Her hands are in mittens also tied to splints. She tries to open her eyes, searching through the swelling,

The nurse comes to check tubes and vital signs.

The woman brushes back her dark wispy hair and looks up at the nurse. “What is wrong with that baby? Where is her hair?... Her face? ... Her body?”

“Remember the doctor spoke to you about it?” The nurse’s voice gently persists.. “Remember? Remember?”

“No. Spoke to me? No.”

“About her body, her face.” Pulling a chair close, the nurse sits next to her. “The baby will she will look a little different.”

The woman stares confused at the nurse in her white uniform. “Where is Katherine? Where is my baby? My little girl?”

The nurse answers softly. “This is Katherine. You can see her.”

“But I can’t. I can’t see her. I can’t see her.”

“Katherine, are you ready?” Mum calls as she comes into the house. She stops when she sees her daughter with her long brown hair flowing and the warmth of black velvet embracing her. “You look beautiful.”

“That’s what mothers are supposed to say.” (Chapter 5)

Internet Sites - Susanne Gervay

- ❑ **Susanne Gervay** - www.sgervay.com
- ❑ HarperCollins Publishers - website: www.harpercollins.com.au
- ❑ Lateral Learning Speakers' Agency - www.laterallearning.com
- ❑ Writers' events at The Hughenden - www.hughendenhotel.com.au
- ❑ Reading Notes www.harpercollins.com.au
- ❑ Life Education on "I Am Jack" – www.drugsafe.org
- ❑ www.eharold.net

Susanne's Titles

Young Adult Fiction

Butterflies HarperCollins Publishers *

The Cave HarperCollins Publishers *

Shadows of Olive Trees, Hodder Headline Publishers

'Lisa & I' A story which is part of the Anthology -H20: Stories of Water

ABC Books to be released March 2005

Children's Fictions

I Am Jack, HarperCollins Publishers *

Super Jack, HarperCollins Publishers *

Jamie's A Hero, HarperCollins Publishers

Next Stop the Moon, HarperCollins Publishers

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