

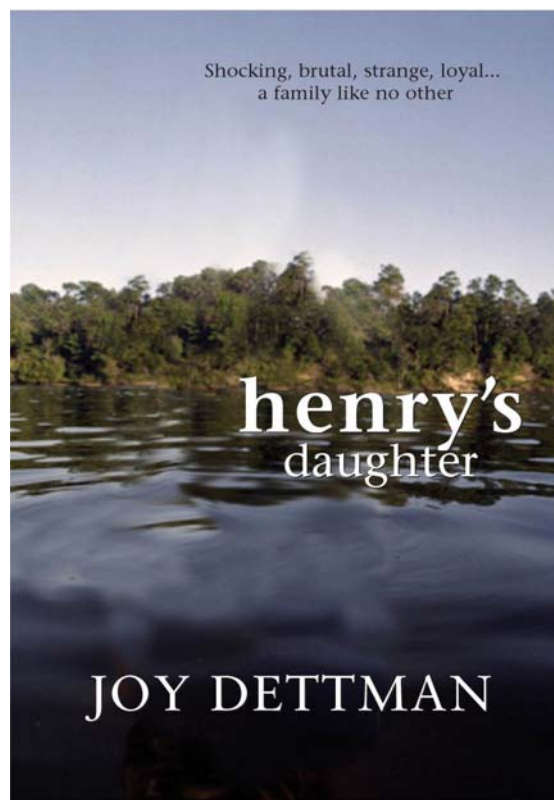

MACMILLAN
AUSTRALIA

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Joy Dettman

HENRY'S DAUGHTER



Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'It's about the life-force elastic connecting people back to someone they know they belong to. Someone of their own . . . Family. That's all there is.' (p 299)

This is a novel about families and about how a community of people works together. It's about love, and about loss, and how good people can sometimes find themselves doing bad or desperate things in order to survive. It's about the power of hope and how it's essential to a person's survival.

Lori is an only daughter with eleven brothers. To add to this unique situation two of her brothers are identical twins who've been reared by her mother Mavis's estranged sister Eva, who wrested them from the family's control when they were ill and in need of her financial advantages. Henry is the father of this family but it's the women who really hold the power. Henry is a good man whose life has gone gradually awry. Once in love with and married to Eva he ran away with Mavis who was thus disinherited by her wealthy parents. Things went steadily downhill from there. Mavis bore a child every year and grew larger by the year as well. Her prettiness is now submerged in gigantic rolls of fat and she's barely able to move from her couch to the kitchen to retrieve further food. Henry has learned to cook and has had to look after the family whilst earning an indifferent living. Martin at 18 is the eldest and working, as is Donny. The rest - Greg, Vinnie, Micky, Jamesy, Neil, Tim, Matthew . . . are at school or are babies and Lori is caught in the middle. And then there are the twins who were taken away - Alan and Eddy. Lori sometimes feels like a piece of elastic that's stretched between all of them. Things are brought to a head when Eva arrives with her solicitor and her lover Alice hoping to settle her legal claim to parenting the twins once and for all. But only one twin is 'captured' and he gradually becomes one of the family as well. Henry is at his wits' end when Mavis gives birth to Matthew and then becomes pregnant again, and when a dramatic argument occurs, he kills himself. Mavis sinks into further squalor and Lori is left to pick up the pieces. When the other twin Eddy arrives he comes up with an idea which just might save them. But are they brave enough to try it?

This novel is a rite of passage for Lori, first and foremost, but also for all the members of her family, including Mavis, her mother. *'It's a weird feeling, being eleven, a bit like this time of day, sort of balancing on the edge of the dark time before tomorrow. Or . . . or like when she walks along the top of old Mrs Roddie's brick fence . . . [which] is too narrow to walk on . . . There's a concrete footpath on one side and prickly rose bushes on the other, so she has to keep moving fast to keep her balance.'* (p 19) It's about women and their innate need to protect and nurture. Lori (who has always wanted to be a boy!) discovers her inner female power when she has to. Her tendency to be cynical and lacking in warmth is tested by the desperate needs of the children around her whom she loves despite herself.

Mavis, on the other hand, has had her instincts destroyed by events in her childhood which have left her scarred. Not even able to express her true love to Henry, she has taken out her frustrations on her children - but most of all upon herself. Compared to the Queen bee in a hive, Mavis is an awesomely grotesque figure draining her family of life and yet making them dependent on her too. Lori appeases her with food in return for the money her pension brings them. *'It's like she's offering sacrifices to some primitive god figure so it doesn't bring destruction down on this family.'* (p 181) But Mavis betrays their trust by binging on takeaways and cigarettes. When the children decide to imprison her in order to

force her to lose weight and to stop spending the pension money, she begins to metamorphose into another sort of creature altogether.

There is a fairy tale aspect to this story about abandoned children taking control of their own lives and outwitting an evil mother. Mavis is the classic witch of fairy tale . . . she's voracious in her appetites, totally self-absorbed and expects the children to do her bidding. She is transformed in a classic fairy tale scenario from a gigantic creature to a person of a more normal size. Lori is the child left home alone to protect her siblings; she is transformed from a helpless child into a powerful woman. Eddy is the trickster; Micky the loveable and loving fool; Greg is the bad seed; Vinnie is the prodigal son returned; Martin is the elder hero figure; Donny is the absent brother etc. Another magical and tangible act of transformation occurs when the children re-decorate and clean their house and make it into a home. They rescue themselves from a fate worse than death - from being separated from their loved ones like Henry was (and as Mavis was as well).

The personal and the political are juxtaposed constantly in this book. The desperation of these children is exacerbated by the vagaries of the social welfare system which doles out money to hopeless cases like Mavis who spends it on herself rather than her children; by doctors who know what's going on but won't lift a finger to help. *'Big always rules small, like, size is power. Small countries get taken over by the army of large countries, who kill the people, wreck everything then set up that country the way they want it . . . How do you control big countries if you are a small country? How do you make a world change when you can't make people change their socks?'* (p 299) When they decide to take matters into their own hands and lock Mavis up, they know that society would call it illegal; an infringement of her rights. But they also know that unless they stop Mavis's downhill slide into ever-increasing obesity and ill-health, she'll die and they'll be left destitute.

This novel is also about how life often consists of a chain of events driven by some dramatic event or turning point. *'Greg being kicked out of school was what Lori's rotten schoolteacher calls a catalyst, which is like one thing making something else happen.'* (p 86) Later, it's Alan calling Henry 'dad' (p 108) which triggers the argument leading to Henry's suicide. It shows that life is not simply a gradual progress, but that one life can be overturned by extraordinary events. Ordinary lives are lived at the mercy of cruel and mercurial fate.

The Smith-Owens are a family virtually orphaned, marooned on an island from which there seems no escape. They are in desperate need of help. But they're also a family of children determined to stay together at any cost. This is about the power of hope and how it leads to a miracle, worked by Henry's daughter - *'who makes the world for them a not too bad place'*. (p 404)

WRITING STYLE AND TECHNIQUES

1. There is quite a lot of discussion in this novel about the power of words and literacy. Lori thinks at one point that *'if you write that something is the same as something else, then it has to be a thing everybody knows, or it's wasting words. Such as, when Wendy Johnson says that Mavis is a humpback whale, well, everyone knows what a humpback whale looks like, but if Kelly Waters calls Mavis a fat white gubba, no one, except the Aborigines, have got a clue what a gubba looks like.'* (p 7) Micky becomes determined to become a trade teacher, and solicits Alan's superior skills to help him learn. Lori overhears these lessons and picks up words which she imperfectly but often hilariously incorporates in her school assignments. (pp 91-2) Did you find this theme reflected in the writer's style? Is she a wordsmith too?
2. Dettman often uses strong 'oppositions' to create impact. eg The chapter entitled 'Survival' begins: *'There's a new red mound in the cemetery, and it doesn't even have a name. Henry has gone to heaven and Willama has gone to hell.'* (p 114) Did you notice any other striking examples of this sort of device?
3. Repetition is another device (used again on p 114) which gives the narrative impact and drive. Is repetition an essential device for an author wanting to achieve effect?
4. Metaphors are used frequently in this book. eg The battle between Eva and Mavis over the twins is described as *'some mad old war . . . Lori doesn't know how that war got started but now some poor innocent little country has gone and got itself caught up in it and it's going to get bombed; it's going to get wiped off the planet.'* (p 62) When Lori has almost given up hope of a happy life, she feels like *'She's been ripped out of a cocoon too early, so she didn't have time to grow wings. She's turned into a wingless moth with two big eyes that can see the whole world is waiting out there to stomp on her because she has to crawl along the gutter instead of flying in the sky.'* (p 154) Did you find the writing emotionally moving and exciting in this regard?
5. The dialogue in this novel is a challenge for an author since so much of it is delivered by children. Does Dettman make her young characters believable via the dialogue?
6. Plot in a novel like this relies on credibility. How possible is the internment of Mavis in your view? Do neighbours really miss so much of what happens in their neighbourhood? How does Dettman convince her readers when she is creating a plot? It might be interesting to research real life stories about people being held captive or being hidden by relatives or friends, in order to discuss this. (eg The recent high profile story about Natasha Ryan who escaped her family's discovery in Rockhampton for five years.)

THE AUTHOR

Joy Dettman was born in Echuca in Victoria and spent her early years in small country towns in NSW and Victoria. She now lives in Melbourne. A mother of four, she is a full time writer and author of several award-winning stories. Her first novel *Mallawindy* was a huge success, and was followed by highly acclaimed novels *Jacaranda Blue*, *Goose Girl*, *Yesterday's Dust* and *The Seventh Day*.

She says of this book that: *'Writing Henry's Daughter was the most fun I've had when sitting in front of a computer.'*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'Henry, the little shadow, coming and going.' (p 315) Is Henry a weak man or a saintly figure who is capable of unconditional love?
2. 'This is a female war and only females can fight in it.' (p 62) Is this a particularly feminist text in your opinion? How are women portrayed in this novel? Is the role of a girl in an all-male family always this difficult or significant?
3. Obesity is a source of grief and tragedy in this novel. View the film *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* which features a similarly dependent and debilitated mother figure and compare the two.
4. 'Dark secrets' are a favourite theme in Dettman's work. This novel has not only the secret of Henry's parentage but other darker secrets which are revealed at the end. Does everyone have a dark secret or does this sort of intrigue only happen in fiction? Discuss.
5. Eva and Alice's homosexual relationship is implied (p 42) and then made explicit later. What do you think of the novel's treatment of homosexuality? Is Eva and Alice's relationship treated seriously?
6. The issue of the Stolen Generation and of Aboriginal people losing their heritage is suggested by Henry's mysterious parentage. (p 73) Is the issue central to this book thematically?
7. 'Getting adopted must run in families. Being taken away from your mother must run in families. Being deserted by your father must run in families.' (p 150) Is this a novel about people resisting the pull of environmental inheritance? Does Lori try to rescue her siblings from an inevitable fate? Discuss.
8. The cover of the novel features a dark lake, indicating that throughout the novel water is used as a thematic device constantly. eg On pp 10-12 there is a discussion of what keeps a country (Australia) or a town (Willama) alive. 'Towns don't grow big unless they've got plenty of water.' (p 11) Was this environmental theme important in the book do you think? Is the author implying that water to a town is like love is to a child? (Note also that the children escape to the creek often when they are frightened of Mavis's outbursts.) 'It's interesting the way those waters pure refuse to join into one, which is like Eva and Mavis, when you come to think about it.' (p 12) When Alan nearly drowns it's Lori who saves him. Try to find other examples in the novel where water is used as a metaphor.
9. Is class a significant topic here? Mavis and Eva's background is wealthy; Martin marries Kelly and her family's money. What does the novel say about 'class'?
10. 'Everyone in the world today is supposed to be equal and like, have equal rights . . . And how can kids believe that crap, when the whole world is in-your-face unequal?' (pp 299-300) Is this a political book, do you think?
11. Dettman often explores the themes of hope and redemption in her novels. Compare this to the ending of her other novels such as *Mallawindy* and discuss.
12. Family and the ties that bind us to our parents and siblings is the core of this book. Working together to achieve harmony as a family or a community is a part of that theme. Read the essay Lori writes on 'multiculturalism' (pp 279-380) and discuss in relation to the novel's plot and themes.

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