

Jolt

Bernard Beckett

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Recommended for Secondary



Resource Kit Contains

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Synopsis

We ran, down through the thick bush below the slip, Rebecca leading. Lisa's light pack slung over one shoulder and bouncing wildly, as if it was as frightened as the rest of us. Below me I could hear the chatter of a stream, mixed with the heavy breathing of the others. Above me I could hear the men giving chase.

Marko surfaces from a drug induced haze to find himself hidden from the world in a psychiatric ward. He is certain the 'Doctor' means to kill him, and he in turn has vengeful plans of his own.

But how is it he came to stop taking his medication? Who can Marko trust and how much time does he have?

Time enough to write it all down, his story of a coast to coast trip, and the earthquake which ripped his world apart.

A thriller that will breathe cold air under your collar.

'Funny, raw, fantastic... The most exciting Young Adult writer writing in this country.' Kate De Goldi on NZ National Radio

About the Author

Bernard Beckett is one of the most provocative and inventive writers for young people. His books are extremely popular with teenagers. A teacher and writer, he has won many awards and fellowships for his fiction.

Bernard Beckett's work has been described as having 'a mainline to contemporary boys'. He captures their voice perfectly and treats them like the sophisticated readers they are.

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1. Note from the Author

Jolt is my favourite of the books I've written (so far) and I'm not altogether sure why that is. Part of it undoubtedly has to do with the circumstances in which it was written. I wrote it while overseas. My partner and I spent three months of a European summer travelling around on bikes, exploring backroads and living in our little tent. I carried an exercise book with me, adding to the tale in between eating, swimming and generally lazing about. So it's pretty hard not to look fondly upon something so caught up in memories of sundrenched rambling. Also, because I usually cram my writing into the small gaps work allows, *Jolt* was a comparatively

relaxed process. I could spend all morning on the bike thinking about where I was at with the story and what would come next, and in that sense it is the most considered story I've created.

I was aware as this story unfolded that it was a bit different from the previous two in that it didn't have the same element of humour. This worried me a bit. The problem with comedy of course, is that nobody takes it seriously, and I'd hate to think I was subconsciously avoiding laughs in an effort to write a 'better book'. This would be particularly tragic if I was to have wandered into that finger-down-the-throat genre of 'books with a message'. What I hope has happened instead is that the demands of the story have taken over. That is to say, there is less humour in *Jolt* because fighting for your life isn't particularly funny.

I guess the thing the reader will most notice about *Jolt* is the structure, and the way it brings together what are essentially three different stories. When people asked me about it I used to say it was a sort of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* meets *Tomorrow When the War Began* with a bit of a *Macbeth* thing happening – only not as good. The story in the Bush was the main idea I suppose. The notion of teenagers surviving against the odds in an inhospitable environment has always been a winner, for all the obvious reasons, and I wanted to have a crack at it. The Hospital thing served two purposes. It gave the story another dimension and hopefully took it away from being too predictable, and also it set up an element of suspense which wasn't possible in the Bush alone. Because the story is told in the first person and in the past tense we immediately know the teller has survived. By setting the telling up in the little room in the hospital I wanted to play with that and keep it all a bit creepier.

The last part is my favourite, although I can imagine some readers will wish it had never been written. The story could easily end at page 140 or so, but I've always found straight action/adventure stories a bit frustrating. The idea that you can automatically set up characters who are good or evil and then get the reader to desperately want the good to harm the evil (because that's what the good do isn't it?) always seems a bit dull to me. What happens after the war hero returns home? What about the nightmares, the impossibility of returning to normal, the mental breakdowns? To me that's where the story just starts to get interesting.

I hope though that the reader doesn't feel obliged to believe the way a book ends reflects the way the writer thinks the issue should resolve itself. I didn't have Marko giving in to Lisa because I thought she was right. I just thought it was the most interesting, provocative outcome. To me the idea that when shit happens, it happens to everyone, no matter which side you are on, is an interesting one. That's the reason the book extends beyond the point where the battle is resolved. I hope that doesn't make it smug or preachy. I will be very happy indeed if people just find this story interesting.

2. Draft writing

The following is the first page of the text as it was when I first wrote it. Since then a fair bit of editing and rewriting has occurred. Get the students to compare this to the print version and identify five differences (they can be as minor as a comma being added.) For each one see if they can explain the effect the change has had, and maybe too guess what I was trying to do in each case. The purpose of this is twofold. It will give the students a chance to consider the way quite small changes in language can have a big impact on flow and meaning. Also it will introduce the notion of reworking text, and allow you to discuss the idea of writing being all about revisiting and refining.

Once, when I was seven years old, I stole the teacher's chalk. A girl in my class, Susanna, told on me and I was kept in all lunchtime. That afternoon I wagged school for the very first time. I looked up Susanna's address in the phonebox, walked for half an hour to reach her house, and strangled both her pet rabbits. I still remember how much better that made me feel. My parents were horrified.

I was sent to see a child psychologist who apparently diagnosed an 'overdeveloped revenge instinct'. After a series of expensive consultations, where I was listened to and made to draw pictures and role play with dolls, I was pronounced cured.

Last night I saw the Doctor again and immediately I knew the psychologist was wrong. I have no choice. I will kill him. I only caught a glimpse of him, across the ward, acting like any doctor acts, as if the cracks the earthquake opened up are deep enough to swallow his past. I wish I could have kept staring so he might have turned and caught my eye, and seen the murder there. Then he might have felt some of the fear that is owed him. But I am not that stupid. This is his territory and surprise is my only weapon. The best revenge is borne of patience. I understand this, and so I survive.

3. Timeline activity

Timelines are a tried and true method of ensuring the little dears have at least flicked through most of the chapters. In *Jolt's* case the time frame has been played around with which might make this more interesting. The sort of grid described below can simply be used as a pictorial summary of the story or lead to some fairly close analysis of the book's structure. Have the students create a timeline in two dimensions (don't worry, they do this stuff in Maths all the time). Along the horizontal axis have them either number pages or chapters in the order they appear in the book. Down the vertical axis have a chronological order – starting perhaps with the end of the sixth form, when the PE course is introduced, and ending with the Doctor being discovered at the hospital. Now each chapter, with its requisite summary, can appear in a box somewhere on the grid, according to both where it appears in the book (how far along the page it appears) and when it occurs in time (how far down the page it appears). This will give a picture of the

structure of the book. From here you can get students to comment on the pattern of their graph. What does it show them about the way the book unfolds? Get them to circle or shade the three distinct stories. Have them explain which of the sections they most enjoyed, and why.

4. Court case

Court cases always work in class, with a single caveat. Students only get into them if they are given sufficient time, energy and direction. That is, as a single spell activity this is a bit hopeless, but run over the course of three or four spells and sufficiently hyped at the beginning, it is guaranteed to fly. One of the key reasons Marko gives in the book for not going to the police is his belief that nobody will take his testimony seriously, and therefore the Doctor will escape free. In particular he fears his record as a psychiatric patient and the Doctor's opportunity to establish alibis will count against him. This activity is a chance for the students to put these assumptions to the test. The class is to be divided into two groups. (It could be interesting to allow them to self select. If they feel responsible for the point of view they have they will defend it more keenly.) One side will be the defence team, one the prosecution. Their roles are as follows:

- A team of two will make a case at the depositions hearing (ten minutes at the end of spell one). This involves a speech to the court explaining why the case should or should not go ahead. The court (you) then decides if there is enough evidence to warrant a trial. (Obviously it's in the interests of the activity that it does, but if the defence do an excellent job then all power to them!)
- Two more students from each team will be the main lawyers. They are responsible for deciding which witnesses to call at the trial and what questions to ask them. (Their initial task is to write these questions out.)
- The other team members will be the witnesses. They can be anyone who is either mentioned in the story or can be invented without compromising any details of the story. These will probably include the police officers who investigated the murder, forensic experts, Rebecca, Lisa and Jonathon, the other students from the trip, Marko's family, people from the hospital, Ms Jenkins' family, and of course Marko and the Doctor. The witnesses spend the first spell with their lawyers going over their stories.

Halfway through the first spell the lawyers from the two teams should meet to negotiate witnesses. That is, two teams can not both present a different Andrew for example, so agreement must be reached as to which team has claim on which witness (remembering of course, that the other side can always cross-examine a witness). Insist that everybody must have a job, i.e. it is the responsibility of the team to create the required number of witnesses.

Depending on numbers there is also room to make the cross-examining lawyers different from the presenting lawyers, so creating two more positions.

Spells two, three and four (if necessary) will then be spent on the formal procedure of the court. Witnesses are called (prosecution first), questioned and then cross-examined. If this is taken seriously and the authentic formality of a court room is established, this will be a long process (easy two hours). At the conclusion have every student spend a spell writing their own summary statements, focussing on what they saw to be the weakness of the opposition team's case. The next spell the groups decide on the best ones to be read out, so concluding the trial. You then get to make your decision, and of course half the class will hate you for it!

5. Marko's response

When Lisa puts it to Marko in the cemetery that he should release the Doctor his decision is by no means clear cut. In the book he sees things her way but it could easily have had a different ending. He could have stood up to her, and explained as convincingly as he could exactly why the Doctor should die.

Get the students to imagine they are Marko and he refuses to let Lisa convince him. Their task is to write up his response. It should explain as clearly and as passionately as possible why the Doctor should be left to die.

Once the speeches are complete you might try the following activity: Have all the speeches handed in, without their names on. Give them back out randomly so the students don't know whose work they have. Students are then to pair off and read the speech they have to their partner. The pair decide which is best and then join another pair. The two best speeches are read again, the four decide on the best of these, and then they join another four. Continue until there are two big groups. Have the winning two pieces read out loud to the class and then have the whole class decide which is best. It's up to you then whether you let people know who the work belonged to.

At this point there's a chance to open up a discussion on what made the best plea, and indeed whether or not the Doctor should have been left to die.

6. Intensity graph

Sometimes reducing a story to a pictorial form helps students 'see' the way a book is put together. It also gets students to familiarise themselves with the details of the story. Because *Jolt* is essentially a thriller, the way the building of intensity is handled is going to have a lot to do with the level of its success. The students are to create their own 'Intensity Graph'. This is a simple line graph. On the horizontal axis are the page numbers, perhaps split into their sections or chapters. On the vertical axis they measure 'intensity'. Explain to them that this is a measurement of their own response to that part of the book. It is their answer to the question 'at this point in the book, how important was it to me to know

what was going to happen next?' The more the student feels the need to find out, the higher the intensity 'score'. Once the students have completed their line they can do the following:

- In words, describe how the tension builds and falls away during the book.
- Find a passage (approximately fifty words) from a section which you labelled high intensity, and another which was low intensity. Copy both out and compare the language used (choice of words, length of sentences, the pace at which details are revealed). How is language used to create intensity?
- A challenge for creative students. Take your low intensity passage and rewrite it as if it represents a high intensity moment in the book. Really exaggerate this and have some fun with it.

7. Script work

One of the skills of reading is the ability to develop an understanding of the characters presented in the book. In this respect the reader does a lot of the work, fleshing out the character described, and using imagination to create a person who is believable for them. Working with script based on a book is a good way for students to explore further their understanding of characters. How do they talk? How do they stand? Who do they look at most? etc. All the things you consider when putting anything on stage. The following short script is based upon a conversation between Lisa, Marko, Jonathon and Rebecca, with Ms Jenkins hovering in the background. It occurs on the cycling day, at the top of the first hill when Jonathon and Rebecca have powered off ahead and then waited at the top for Marko and Lisa to catch up. Think carefully about how each of the characters is feeling, both when they are speaking and when they are listening. By playing different elements up (Marko's feelings towards Lisa for instance) the scene can be changed substantially.

Jonathon Took your time.

Marko Leave her alone. She's doing fine.

Jonathon Oh yes, a bit of a bond developing here is there?

Lisa I can speak for myself. It's your fault we're going so slowly.

Jonathon How is it my fault you're slow?

Ms Jenkins Hey guys, let's not...

Jonathon No, come on, I want to know. How is it my fault?

Lisa You led at such a crap pace. You were all over the place. That's what's made me tired.

Jonathon No, being shit on a bike made you tired.

Marko She's right. You're a crap leader.

Jonathon And you'd be so much better?

Marko I couldn't be worse.

Rebecca This is pathetic.

Jonathon It talks.

Rebecca We've only been going an hour and already you're screwing this up.

Lisa No, 'we.' We're screwing this up. You're part of this group too.

Rebecca Didn't ask to be.

Marko And we didn't ask to have you.

Ms Jenkins Hey that's not helping...

Jonathon See, I knew you'd take her side.

Lisa She wasn't taking sides, she was just saying...

Jonathon I've got an idea. Let's all cycle by ourselves. Then we can see who's been slowing the group down.

Lisa I never said I was fast.

Jonathon You did. You said I was slowing us down.

Marko And you are.

Jonathon And again Marko rushes to Lisa's side.

Marko Because she's not an arsehole.

Rebecca You're not so fast you know.

Jonathon So you want a race to the next stop?

Rebecca No worries.

Jonathon Loser has to wait for these two.

Ms Jenkins I really think the group should stay together.

8. Media report

Although it largely happens offstage, the devastation of the city by an earthquake is a central event in the book. The production of a media report on the tragedy is a good way of fleshing out the story, and getting the students to mess around with whatever technology is available in the school. Depending on the resources, the production of a fully edited video piece could represent a full week's work. Groups of three or four will probably work best.

Brief

You are to present a five minute media report on the earthquake that has devastated Wellington. This is to take the form of either a radio or television report. You must include three of the following five elements:

- A voice-over introduction, highlighting the scale of the tragedy.
- An interview with a survivor/eyewitness.
- An interview with an expert of some sort.
- A studio debate between two parties (e.g. police/civil defence) who both blame the other for problems with the clean-up operation.
- An uplifting human interest angle (the blind cat that spent three days staying with its injured owner who was trapped beneath an overturned ice-cream truck etc.).

Because this is for the sound-bite obsessed media, ensure the time limit is adhered to and the emphasis is on building powerful images and snappy editing.