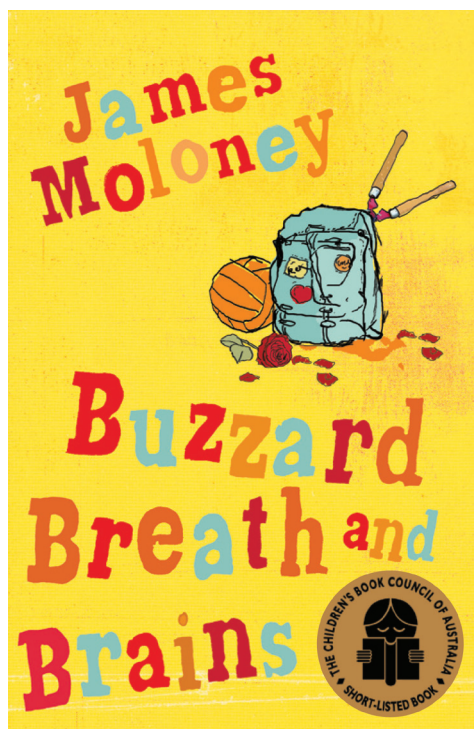


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Buzzard Breath and Brains

by James Moloney



Teachers' Notes

Written by a Practising Teacher Librarian (Middle School)
in Context with the Australian Curriculum (English)

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SYNOPSIS

Buzzard Breath and Brains is the companion novel to James Moloney's *Swashbuckler*, a story about the sword-wielding Anton who rescues Peter from the school bullies, Rex and Tony – a.k.a Buzzard Breath and Brains.

In this second instalment, the narrative voice is shared by Rex and his cousin Natalie. The alternating chapters give an insight into Rex's home life and lack of self confidence. They also reveal that there are different forms of bullying, some involving direct physical and verbal threats, others being more discreet such as exclusion. Both Natalie and Rex discover much about themselves and others in this fast-paced, relevant and timeless story.

THEMES

Friendship:

- Natalie is a friend to her cousin Rex. She tries to discover who was responsible for the rose garden vandalism (an event from *Swashbuckler* that resulted in Rex and Tony being framed and subsequently suspended from school for two weeks).
- Apart from Tony, Rex doesn't have friends of his own. Once he gets to know Peter – the boy he once bullied in *Swashbuckler* – his behaviour starts to change.
- Natalie excludes her friend Lucy. This is a form of bullying, although Natalie doesn't realise this.
- Peter tries to protect his friend Anton by confessing to the rose garden incident.

Bullying:

- Rex is bullied by his older brother, Kerrod. His lack of self confidence at home contributes to his actions at school.
- Rex's father does not intervene when Kerrod taunts Rex, expecting Rex to solve this issue on his own. This contributes further to the problem.
- Tony's way of gaining power is through fear.
- Natalie doesn't realise that she is bullying Lucy by excluding her from her friendship group.
- Ms Silec plays an important role in guiding both Natalie's and Rex's behaviour.
- Rex doesn't want to hurt kids anymore; he feels physically sickened when pushed by Tony to do so.

Family/Relationships:

- Sibling relationships can cause stress for those who are unreasonably treated.
- Rex's parents do not fully realise the torment caused to Rex by Kerrod's bullying.
- Natalie is determined to help her cousin Rex.
- Parents sometimes need to intervene in sibling rivalries.

WRITING STYLE

Buzzard Breath and Brains is a dual narrative. The text is written in first person, past tense. Cousins Natalie and Rex are in the same class at school. They share their stories in alternating chapters. Through the eyes of two very different characters, the reader gains an insight into why Rex has bullied others and how his feelings about this change as he gains more self confidence. We also see a different form of bullying as Natalie excludes Lucy from her friendship group.

By seeing the world through Rex's point of view, it is hard not to feel sorry for this repeat offender. When he befriends Peter and finally resists the controlling Tony, Rex embarks on a new beginning.

STUDY NOTES

Before reading, discuss the fact that one of the narrators of *Buzzard Breath and Brains* is Rex, a bully from *Swashbuckler*.

- If you've read *Swashbuckler*, what do you recall about Rex?
- Predict what you think his narration may be like.
- Were you surprised that the companion novel to *Swashbuckler* would be told in part from Rex's point of view? What did you think it would be about? Discuss.

After reading the first two chapters, stop to reflect:

- Why do you think the author chose to start the story with Natalie narrating rather than Rex?
- Why is Natalie one of the two narrators? How does this help to better tell Rex's story?
- Ms Silec is introduced early and plays an important role in the story. Why is she integral to the development of both Natalie and Rex?

Compare extracts from *Swashbuckler* that depict Rex via Peter's narration with parts of Rex's own voice in *Buzzard Breath and Brains*.

- Does the reader gain a consistent view of Rex across both novels?
- Do others see Rex as he sees himself?
- Do your feelings towards Rex change once you hear his side of the story?
- Reflect on these concepts in a journal piece.
- Create a mind map to show your understanding of the relationships between Rex and other characters such as Tony, Natalie, Kerrod, Peter and Ms Selic.

Choose a minor character from *Buzzard Breath and Brains* such as Lucy, Ms Selic, Kerrod or Rex's mother.

- Brainstorm characteristics of your chosen person. What are they like? Think of a list of 10-20 possible interview questions that you would like to ask this person. Try to answer these same questions in role as the character.
- Write a chapter suitable for inclusion in *Buzzard Breath and Brains* with this character as the narrator.
- With your character in mind, respond to a series of questions as part of a round robin class activity.

Compare the picture book *Ugly Fish* by Kara LaReau and Scott Magoon with *Buzzard Breath and Brains*.

- Is the *Ugly Fish* more like Tony or Rex? Justify your answer with sound reasoning.
- Create your own picture book suitable for an early childhood audience centering on the theme of bullying.

In small groups, brainstorm examples of bullying. Share with the class.

- As a class, make a chart defining what bullying is and is not. Discuss the ideas presented.
- Create an anti-bullying campaign for the school. Devise slogans, logos and posters.
- Use school assembly time to promote this campaign.
- Visit younger classes and discuss what bullying is and strategies for dealing with bullying.
- Teach younger students the sorts of comments that are inappropriate to say to others .
- Involve the school's guidance counsellors, chaplains and parents.
- Include strategies that help build resilience.

The boys and girls play a netball game against one another.

- How does bullying make its way into this scene?
- Learn about the rules of netball and hold a class match.
- Watch examples of sports reports from the evening news. Consider the way in which 'warfare' metaphors are often used in such reports. Discuss the value or otherwise of such conventions. Compose a sports report of the netball match (either your class match or that from the novel).
- Discuss the destructive nature of sledging that often occurs in sport, either on the court or from the sidelines. When does sledging 'cross the line' and become bullying (see The Line activity below).

Why do you think Rex acts like Anton by dressing up in costume at Natalie's place? What similarities are there between Anton's and Rex's experiences?

Imagine that *Buzzard Breath and Brains* is being made into an animated film.

- Create caricatures of the main characters.
- Create a storyboard that outlines the plot of the book/film.
- Create a book/film trailer using a software program such as Microsoft Movie Maker, Prezi (www.prezi.com) or Photostory.

Discuss Peter's decision to confess to Anton's crime. Why did he do this? Does this make him a hero? Justify your opinion with reasoning.

Bullying is a complex issue.

- Why do you think Rex's father refuses to help Rex when he's bullied by Kerrod?
- Why, if Rex gets bullied himself, does he then bully others?
- How is exclusion a form of bullying?
- Investigate the motives of bullies.

Write a persuasive piece on one of the following topics:

- Bullies should be suspended from school.
- Bullies should attend compulsory counselling sessions.
- Bullying should be considered a crime.
- Bullies need understanding not punishment.

Rex experiences physical responses to his bullying such as feeling sick in the stomach at the thought of hurting someone.

- Explore ways in which stress and worry can affect the human body.
- Engage in relaxation techniques that may help when such signals occur.

Discuss James Moloney's style of writing. Rewrite the final chapter of *Buzzard Breath and Brains* in keeping with James Moloney's style.

Bullies often lack self-esteem, while those who are victims of bullying often suffer a loss of self-esteem.

- Spend time explaining the importance of self-esteem and how easily this can be damaged.
- Teach students how to genuinely consider the self-esteem of others in their words and actions.
- Have students keep a journal that records positive reflections of themselves over a week or two.
- Encourage a classroom in which there are only 'put-ups' not 'put-downs'.
- Give every student a paper plate. Have students rotate around the room writing 'warm fuzzies' or positive adjectives about each class member on their plate. Create a class display of these plates to celebrate the students' attributes.
- Insert articles written by the students in the school newsletter that promote the culture of a healthy self-esteem both at home and at school.

Write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper about the issue of bullying in schools, being sure to suggest some solutions to this problem.

Imagine you are Lucy or Peter. Write a series of diary entries to reflect your feelings about what's happening at school.

Developing and maintaining respectful relationships is the main aim of the Australian Government's 'The Line' campaign and website.

- Take time to visit this site www.theline.gov.au
- There are downloadable information sheets for teachers as well as links to music and art work created on this theme.
- Students can create their own online drawing to illustrate 'the line' between bullying and just having a joke.
- After listening to some of the music on this site, choose songs that you think would suit this site; alternatively, create your own music or poetry on this topic.

Say No to Bullying Day takes place annually. People are encouraged to wear orange in a collective protest against bullying.

- Investigate the origins of this event and how various groups participate. Newspaper articles and websites are readily available online.
- Write your own newspaper article about Say No to Bullying Day.
- How is bullying protested internationally? Teach specific search skills that help students to locate relevant websites. Spend time evaluating such websites. Visit websites such as www.standupday.com

AUTHOR MOTIVATION (written by James Moloney)

As *Buzzard Breath and Brains* is a sequel, I suppose my motivation was to respond to all of the wonderful feedback I had received about *Swashbuckler*. I also wanted to have a go at the smart-alec voice of Natalie which was nagging away in my head as I started to think about what might happen in the story. At first I had tried to keep Anton Schofield in this sequel, but it proved impossible and that is partly why I developed Natalie as a second main character. It is fun for a man to try to think like a girl – sometimes, anyway. Girls can be such mysterious creatures and to understand them, it is an interesting exercise to make yourself think like one and really get inside her head. It was definitely part of my motivation to show that girls can be bullies just as much as boys and that, in fact, the way girls bully one another can be even worse.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Moloney is one of Australia's best-known children's writers. His books range across the age groups from seven to seventeen year-olds, many of them published by UQP. *Swashbuckler*, which won the CBCA Book of the Year Award in 1996, and its sequel, *Buzzard Breath and Brains*, are among his favourites.

A teacher-librarian in his earlier career, James now writes every day in a shed at the bottom of his garden in Brisbane. He shares his home with his wonderful wife, Kate and occasionally with his three adult children who always seem to turn up around dinner time.