

WHISKY CHARLIE FOXTROT

Annabel Smith

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Year level: SS

Cross curriculum: Social studies

ABOUT THE BOOK

All the times he had thought about the demise of his relationship with Whisky, it had always been Whisky's fault. In Charlie's version of events, any bad behaviour on his part had always been justifiable as a response to a graver misdemeanour on Whisky's part. But now that Whisky was in a coma it no longer mattered whether or not Whisky had been a bad brother to Charlie. The moment that car hit him Whisky entered the realm of the blameless, a state in which he was responsible for nothing and nothing could be held against him. Their relationship, or lack thereof, was now Charlie's responsibility entirely. (pp. 153–154)

Whisky and Charlie are identical twins. But everything about them is poles apart. It's got so bad that Charlie can't even bear to talk to his brother anymore – until a freak accident steals Whisky from his family, and Charlie has to face the fact he may never speak to his brother again.

While Whisky is in a coma, Charlie revisits his and his twin's shared memories – from their childhood in England, through the family's move to Australia and the boys' high school years, and all the way to adulthood when their differences finally eclipsed what things they had in common.

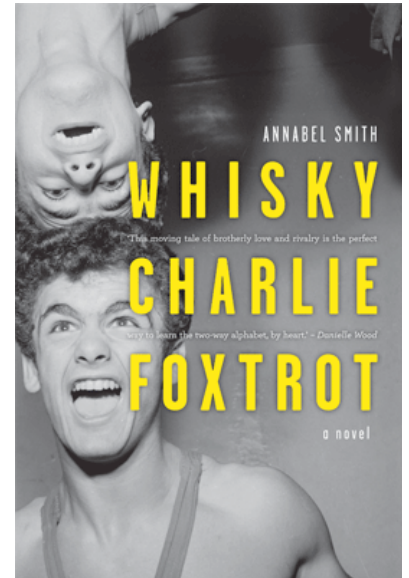
The exchange between the past and present is at the heart of this novel. Its episodic structure is based on the two-way alphabet, each chapter themed around a letter and told in the past tense. Woven through these are present-tense scenes depicting the family's response to the accident.

The push-and-pull of family life plays out through a cast of characters that includes Whisky and Charlie's mother Elaine, their father Bill, Aunt Audrey, Whisky's wife Rosa and Charlie's girlfriend Juliet. When Mike – a Canadian half-brother who was adopted out in infancy – makes contact and announces his intention to visit, the family dynamics are shuffled again, the past insistent on asserting its presence.

This is a book about making mistakes and facing up to them, and a book about forgiveness and love. *Whisky Charlie Foxtrot* is a marvellous family drama, with depth, substance, humour, an intriguing structure, and a big heart.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Annabel Smith's first novel, *A New Map of the Universe*, was published by UWA Publishing in 2005 and shortlisted for the WA Premier's Book Awards. Her second novel, *Whisky Charlie Foxtrot*, was published by Fremantle Press in 2012. Annabel has been a writer-in-residence at Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers Centre and holds a PhD in Writing from Edith Cowan University.



STUDY NOTES

A. Short Answer Responses/Group Discussion Questions

1. How does Smith convey a sense of the time period in which the novel is set in the opening chapters?
2. Examine the use and effect of colloquial language in the development of the characters.
3. In what ways do Audrey and Elaine fit female stereotypes in the opening chapter of the novel?
4. How accurately do you believe Smith depicts the confusions of teenagers and 'coming of age' in the chapters 'Delta' and 'Foxtrot'?
5. Why is Charlie still unhappy even when he is successful and wins a trophy at golf?
6. Look closely at the chapter that deals with the family's migration to Australia and where possible compare this to your own experience or to that of your peers or someone you know.
7. What does Charlie learn from his relationship with Kristy?
8. What are some of the things that Charlie questions when he goes to India to work on the advert? What are your views on these issues?
9. What is Charlie's response to Whisky's 'arousal program'? Why does he react in the way he does?
10. Why does Charlie take so long to ask Juliet to marry him?
11. When Rosa arrives on the scene in the chapter 'Lima', Charlie is able to see Whisky in a different light. Explain how.
12. How does Charlie want the family to deal with the news of his mother's illegitimate son, his own half-brother? What does that tell us about Charlie?
13. Why do you think we don't find out the details of Whisky's accident until the chapter 'November'?
14. In the first chapter we are told that one of the most significant problems in Aunt Audrey's marriage was related to her inability to have children. In 'Oscar' we read about Charlie's reasons for refusing to donate sperm to Whisky and Rosa. Do you feel he is justified in his decision? What is the effect of the concluding sentence to this chapter when the third person narrator tells us 'They had asked for his help, for a gift that only he could give. And he had refused.'?
15. In the chapter 'India' we discover that Bill and Elaine have also separated. Do you think that Charlie's relationship with Juliet, and Whisky's relationship with Rosa, are more likely to stand the test of time? Why/why not?
16. Why does Charlie argue with his father in 'Papa'?
17. How does Smith deal with the issue of homosexuality through the characterisation of Marco in the chapter 'Romeo'?
18. It is not until page 154 that we read that Charlie feels 'shame and remorse'. What drives him at last to this state?
19. How does Marco show what a good friend he is to Charlie in the chapter 'Tango'?
20. At one point in their discussion Thomas says to Charlie, 'I've got a theory that there are some things in life we never feel ready for, that it's only by doing them that we become ready.' Explain to what extent you think this is true.
21. In the chapter 'Victor' the family has to deal with major ethical issues. What are they and how do you think you might respond in similar circumstances?
22. Look at the chapter 'Whisky' and explain why Elaine also feels an enormous sense of guilt.

B. Viewing

It could be argued that we often learn about the human experience and make sense of our world through narrative: both prose narrative and film narrative.

Select a short scene from the novel and consider how you would transpose the prose narrative (presented in words) into film narrative (presented in a moving series of frames).

Film Codes

You will need to consider:

- Technical codes: camera angle, distance, movement, lighting and framing
- Audio codes: dialogue, sound effects and music
- Symbolic codes: lighting, colour and juxtaposition of objects
- Written codes: information that you add on screen in written format e.g. dates, names of places, subtitles
- You may need to add/delete dialogue, and/or to use flashbacks to provide a retrospective view

Consider carefully how the different codes will function to create atmosphere, convey emotion, to help shape characters and to 'tell the tale'.

You may present your response in any format you wish (e.g. story board, bullet notes, short film).

C. Structure

A story or narrative is an account of events. 'Narrative structure' is the term we use to describe the way the author has chosen to select or order these events into a meaningful pattern.

If you think about a traditional tale such as *Little Red Riding Hood* you can see that it follows a traditional narrative structure: it begins with the exposition or orientation in which the scene is set and the characters are introduced in a relative state of order. One or more conflicts then arise to disrupt the order of the opening. This is followed by some action on the part of the protagonist (or sometimes an antagonist). Ultimately the conflict or dilemma is resolved and order is restored.

1. Do you consider the narrative structure in Smith's novel to be traditional? Use evidence from the text to justify your answer and to explore the use and effect of narrative structure in the novel.
2. Choose a traditional tale, such as *Little Red Riding Hood* or one of the short stories that you've studied this year, and retell the tale using a non-traditional narrative structure.

D. Writing Outcome

Book Review

Read and analyse a range of reviews of movies or novels with which you are familiar. Make brief notes on the way the choice of tone, language features, images and vocabulary contribute to the different style and effectiveness of each review.

Then look at some of the reviews of Smith's novel *Whisky Charlie Foxtrot* online. Read and analyse these carefully, making notes of what the reviewer sees as Smith's strengths and weaknesses.

Write your own review of *Whisky Charlie Foxtrot*, either (1) for your school magazine or (2) for a Year 12 Reading Group. You should:

- Establish a voice, tone, and personal style that make the review interesting for your chosen audience
- Choose language features, images and vocabulary carefully to enhance your writing
- Be able to develop and justify your own interpretation of the novel and to substantiate your opinion with specific evidence and examples
- Consider whether or not you agree with the published reviewers of her novel

Letter Writing

Write TWO letters:

1. To one of your peers suggesting why you believe that he or she should read this novel
2. To the Head of English at another school/college to say why you believe this novel should be added to their book list for Year 11 or 12 students

Consider carefully the different voice, style, tone, language features, images and vocabulary that you would use for each of the different audiences.

E. Characterisation

Minor characters are the people in a story who are not the main point of the story: they are not the person to whom the main events in the story happen, but they are essential in the way they interact with the main characters and help to convey the issues central to the narrative.

Look carefully at the representation of one of the minor characters in the novel and discuss the contribution he/she makes to the unfolding of narrative events and the exploration of the novel's central issues. You could consider using Bill, Audrey, Marco, Mike or Kristy.

F. Point of View

Although the novel is written in the third person point of view, instead of an omniscient narrator we are limited to Charlie's perspective for the majority of the text. In the chapter entitled 'Echo' Smith writes, 'Charlie became a historian of his own life ... [he] spun the thread of what he wanted to remember and discarded the rest.' (p. 44) But it is not until the chapter entitled 'Quebec' that Charlie actually begins to question himself and his attitude: 'Was it just his imagination that Whisky had always had the upper hand, a convenient fiction he had created?' (p. 183)

1. Find four or five other quotes that show the third person limited point of view and in each case consider how the incident described may have been viewed differently by one or more of the other characters in the novel.
2. Choose one incident from the novel involving both Charlie and Whisky.
 - Write a journal entry from Whisky's point of view.
 - Rewrite the narrative from the third person point of view limited to the perspective of Whisky rather than Charlie.

G. Extended Responses

Your response should demonstrate your understanding of purpose, context and audience, together with a detailed knowledge and understanding of the novel.

1. Robert McKee claims that 'all human beings are in the same boat, they're all trying to make sense out of life [...] the surface may be different, but underneath it's human, it's universal, and it's a bitch.' With close reference to the novel *Whisky Charlie Foxtrot* discuss to what extent you agree/disagree with this quote.
2. Alexander McCall Smith claims that 'It is one of the jobs of fiction to report on the sorrows and tragedies of this world. This must be done, though, from a morally acceptable standpoint.' With close reference to the novel *Whisky Charlie Foxtrot* discuss to what extent Annabel Smith has achieved this.
3. In his novel *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy wrote, 'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' Discuss the extent to which you believe this is true, making close reference to the novel and at the same time drawing on your own experience of life.
4. Our view of life can be enriched by our engagement with texts. They can challenge our pre-existing values and encourage us to reconsider our judgement of people and events. Respond to this statement, making close reference to the novel.

5. Joseph Conrad believed that the task of the author is 'by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is above all, to make you see.' To what extent do you believe Smith achieves this 'task' in her novel?
6. The structure of a novel can influence the way we respond not only to the characters involved but also to the issues that are explored. Discuss the way the structure of this novel has influenced your response.
7. 'Maturity has more to do with what you've learned from the experiences you've had than with the numbers of birthdays you're celebrated.' (Anonymous). Discuss the significance of this statement in relation to the novel and the world in which we live.
8. In his novel *The Book Thief* Markus Zusak writes: 'I don't have much interest in building mystery. Mystery bores me [...] I know what happens and so do you. It's the machinations that wheel us there that aggravate, perplex, interest and astound me.' Discuss this statement in relation to your reading of the novel.
9. Fiction gives us a privileged view into lives that are not our own. With close reference to the novel argue for this proposition and make the case for the importance of reading fiction in our contemporary world.
10. The meanings we make from a text rely heavily on our own life's experiences and our beliefs and values. Discuss the ways in which your personal context influenced the way you were able to engage with, and make meanings from, the novel.

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What gave you the idea for writing Whisky Charlie Foxtrot?

I had an idea for a novel about two brothers who were obsessed with getting into *The Guinness Book of World Records*. Thinking about their first encounter with the book, in October 2002 I wrote a sketch about a woman in a toyshop, looking for a Christmas present for her nephews. But at the end of the sketch was a note saying 'twins' – so I obviously got off track pretty quickly.

How early on in the writing process did you introduce the structure of the two-way alphabet into the story?

The structure was there right from the start. My boyfriend's brother had taught me the alphabet and I was practising it constantly and the thought came to me of writing a book around that. There was never a version without the alphabet.

Did you encounter any difficulties in applying this structure?

Many difficulties. Sometimes the idea for a chapter was easy, for example the ones with names (Juliet, Mike, Oscar etc) all became characters. But then fitting their story into the overall structure, and being hampered by the chronology of the alphabet was difficult. It gave me a few headaches. Others seemed unworkable from the start. Yankee gave me nightmares. I had no idea what to do with it. Luckily it came near the end so I didn't have to worry about it for a long time.

Whisky Charlie Foxtrot contains a wonderful range of characters who are easy to connect to and identify with. It is a family drama that reads like a story that was put together with great affection and enjoyment. Is this correct?

Absolutely. Despite the somewhat dark subject matter, much of the writing was a lot of fun to do.

Are there autobiographical elements to this novel, or did it come mostly from your imagination?

My father and his only brother were estranged for more than a decade and though I never intentionally set out to tackle that subject, my subconscious tipped me in that direction. There are other elements which are loosely autobiographical: my family did emigrate from the UK to Australia in the 1980s, though we came by plane, and ended up in Perth rather than Melbourne. But the feelings of alienation Charlie experiences at his news school were very much my own.

The anecdotes of the voyage to Australia are based on my husband's family's emigration by boat, in the 1970s. There are a few specific scenes which are based on my own experiences – our dog being hit by a car, the fancy-dress competition in the village fete; and the character of Oscar is a sort of amalgam of my two oldest nephews.

Do you have a favourite character?

For all his faults, Charlie has a special place in my heart.

One might think of a coma as a fairly static event: a long period of unconsciousness between the initial cataclysmic accident and the regaining of consciousness (or instead, death). How did you overcome the narrative challenge of having created a potential static scenario – the lengthy bedside vigil?

My research revealed a number of medical complications which added narrative tension to a potentially stagnant situation. The structure, in which the present-day story is interspersed with significant episodes from Whisky and Charlie's past, also provides some drama amidst the stasis. But I think the most important aspect of Whisky's coma is the way it changes those around him, so the real 'action' of the novel happens at a psychological level.

Thomas plays an important role in the articulation of Charlie's responses. Were the seven stages of grief a useful template to apply in your construction of the novel?

Having never experienced anything like this myself, it was difficult to know where to begin when it came to Charlie's reaction to Whisky's situation. The stages of grief provided a framework, laid a path for Charlie to follow and provided a kind of narrative arc for his transformation.