

OLD BERTIE

PERRELLA & OSBORN

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YEAR LEVEL: Y7–12

ABOUT THE BOOK

George Jones is fed up and hungry for change. She's stuck on an island with a bunch of judgemental jerks who all live in fearful deference to Old Bertie, a Giant Squid. Old Bertie devoured George's mother, leaving her father an emotional mess and George a social reject.

But George's world changes when a mysterious stranger washes ashore. Fernandez is the first person to ever enter Old Bertie's watery domain and live to tell the tale. If Fernandez was spared by the Great Beast, could her mum still be out there? And will George be willing to break her dad's heart in her quest to know the truth?

Old Bertie is J.D. Salinger meets Taika Waititi, with a sprinkling of George Orwell. It asks readers to consider how much power a 15-year-old girl might wield in a world that demands complete compliance.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dan Osborn and Vincenzo Perrella are an award-winning creative team who have written for film, television and live performance. *Old Bertie* is their first novel.

THEMES

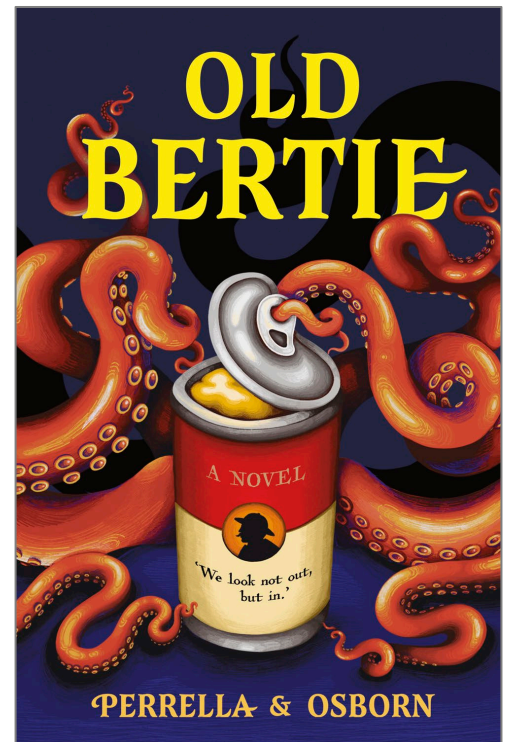
- Curiosity
- Identity and personal growth
- Compliance and control
- Family
- Community, culture and shared beliefs
- Bravery and rebellion
- Coming to terms with the loss of a loved one
- Prejudice and marginalisation

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

- Y7–12 English

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Authors' website: perrella-osborn.com



CLASSROOM IDEAS

Pre-Reading

1. Analyse the book cover as a class. How does the image draw the reader's attention? What clues does it give about what might happen in the story?
2. Discuss the motto of The Island displayed on the cover, **'We look not out, but in.'** Brainstorm ideas of what this could mean or foreshadow in the book.
3. What do you think of when you hear the word 'island'? List as many word and phrase associations as possible.

Discussion Questions

1. Ask students in small groups to look up definitions of important vocabulary in the text that may be unfamiliar, such as:
 - a. maxim
 - b. vitriolic
 - c. cavalcade
 - d. extoll
 - e. deride
 - f. pontificating
 - g. denizen
 - h. benevolence
 - i. polemic
 - j. veneration
 - k. epiphany
2. The story of Van Pham (pp. 4–5) is the first example of what happens when someone tries to express their own personal opinions on The Island.
 - a. How did you feel after reading this anecdote?
 - b. What were the repercussions on Van Pham?
 - c. What do we begin to learn about the community on The Island at this point?
3. Reflect on the foundation story of The Island on page 10. What strikes you as odd about it? Find quotes that shape your sense of the Explorer's suitability to lead.
4. Why do you think no one will sit next to George at school (p. 11)? **'I'd long ago given up on ever having friends'** (p. 12).
5. A bronze sculpture outside George's school depicts a student climbing a ladder that **'... didn't go anywhere, it just ended in empty space, but I think it was supposed to represent the idea of educational success'** (p. 13).
 - a. What do we learn about the educational system of The Island?
 - b. What are their two key principles of education? (Memorisation and regurgitation).
 - c. How is this similar or different to your own schooling?
6. Discuss uses of simile throughout the book and how the authors use it to create rich imagery. For example:
 - a. **'... to see him in action was like watching a drummer in a band'** (p. 17).
 - b. **'Once he'd built up a little momentum, it was like a cart rolling out of control'** (p. 35).
 - c. **'... his arms hanging beside him like limp noodles'** (p. 63).
7. Read the interaction between George's dad and the butcher, McGinney, on pages 17–20.
 - a. How did this passage make you feel?
 - b. Why do you think George's dad is being treated this way?
 - c. Find a quote from these pages that reflects the extent of how poorly the Joneses are being treated (e.g. **'His voice became a whisper. I thought this was for people's pets.'**) (p. 20))
8. Page 22 gives an insight into the character of Frank Jones. What do we learn about him? What do you think might be happening with George's dad's mental health?
9. Discuss what idioms are and the purpose of using them in writing. Brainstorm in pairs what each of the following idioms mean from the text:
 - a. **'having a lend'** (p. 25)
 - b. **'drive me spare'** (p. 31)
 - c. **'until the cows come home'** (p. 59)
 - d. **'spanner in the works'** (p. 249)

- e. **'on the blink'** (p. 270)
 - f. **'at large'** (p. 285)
10. Read the chapter *The Cage of Shame* from pages 29–37.
 - a. What is your reaction to the process of the shaming?
 - b. Describe both George's and Frank's attitudes towards the shaming, using evidence from the text.
 - c. Discuss the character of the Mayor. What do we learn about him in this passage? Why does he have a personal fanfare announce his arrivals and exits?
 - d. What do you think of the Mayor's comment, **'We humiliate to educate'** (p. 35)?
 11. How does George define the purpose of muttering? Was she right in this case? **'It allows a person to express an underlying attitude of irritation and disdain without having the guts to just come out and say it'** (p. 45).
 12. What stains do you think George is really referring to on page 46? (**'Dad could run his hands up and down that shirt as much as he liked ... Those stains would still be there.'**)
 13. What happens that leads George to think in dismay, **'This is what you get for looking out'** (p. 56)?
 14. If you were George, would you have rescued the stranded man on the beach? What does this decision reveal about George's character?
 15. Explain George's perspective of why **'The parameters of what was possible had just been completely upended'** (pp. 103–104).
 16. Frank states that **'... what you have to accept, is that there's absolutely nothing you can do about it. Asking questions doesn't help'** (p. 124). What does this reflect about the ethos that citizens are taught on The Island?
 17. The elders are described as **'... solemn characters. They maintained boundaries and wandered about deep in thought. That was their job. Pondering intangibles'** (p. 131).
 - a. Describe your own impression of the elders.
 - b. Would you trust them as figures of authority? Why or why not?
 18. What is revealed to the reader in the record of the Mayor's speech (pp. 142–144) following George's mum's death, about the way her family is now being treated?
 19. **'It seemed like anyone could say anything and they'd print it as fact'** (p. 151). Does this draw any parallels with modern society?
 20. **'And I realised I didn't believe one word of it'** (p. 186). Summarise the realisation that George has had and what has led her to feel this way.
 21. Discuss George's reflection on the canning factory and her dad's love of cans: **'Because a can is a vessel whose purpose is to take the natural things of the world that grow freely, and imprison them forever'** (p. 274).
 22. What is contradictory about Frank's response to Fernandez after freeing him from the cage, **'Let it out, mate' he said. 'Let it out'** (p. 362), compared to his usual methods of coping with stress?

Post-reading

1. How would you describe George's relationship with her dad? Analyse how their relationship changes over the course of the book and link it to key events that cause each change.
2. In your opinion, what were the strengths and weaknesses of the novel? Would you recommend it to others and why or why not? Write a short review for your school newspaper.
3. In your opinion, what idea/s does the novel explore that are of value to your own life or society?
4. Discuss in small groups: at the conclusion of the book, what do you now believe about Old Bertie?
5. Dystopian fiction usually explores a vision of the future through themes of control and oppression in societies with unchecked power or that are deeply flawed. As a class, analyse the key characteristics of a dystopian society and how they are represented in *Old Bertie*.

Creative Writing

1. The book concludes open-endedly. Write a final chapter imagining what happens next.
2. Write a passage from the perspective of Fernandez after his rescue as he discovers the ways of life on The Island.

Health and Wellbeing

1. What do you think of Frank's self-described strategy for dealing with issues? '**... the best strategy is to take the things that might bother you and simply block them out**' (p. 48).
 - a. Is it working for him? What evidence on page 50 tells you that it isn't?
 - b. Brainstorm healthier strategies in small groups for managing stress and dealing with problems.



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