

What I Wrote  
ABC TV Series 3



Teacher's Notes

# Introduction

This study guide to accompany *What I Wrote: Series 3* has been written for teachers of senior secondary students. It provides information and suggestions for learning activities in English, Literature, Theatre Studies and Drama.

*What I Wrote: Series 3* is a TV series broadcast on ABC TV about Australian writers. Dr Tess Brady interviews each writer and each episode focuses on a particular work or theme.

*What I Wrote: Series 3* is also available on DVD. Other titles available in the *What I Wrote* series include:

- What I Wrote: Matt Cameron
- What I Wrote: Louis Nowra
- What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson
- What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson
- What I Wrote: Debra Oswald
- What I Wrote: Andrew Bovell
- What I Wrote: Joanna Murray-Smith
- What I Wrote: Ray Lawler
- What I Wrote: Jack Hibberd
- What I Wrote: Alice Pung
- What I Wrote: Peter Goldsworthy
- What I Wrote: ABC TV Series 1
- What I Wrote: ABC TV Series 2

## Find Out More Info

Further information about the series and film trailers can be found at: <http://www.whatiwrote.com.au>

## About the Filmmakers

### Dr Tess Brady *Presenter*

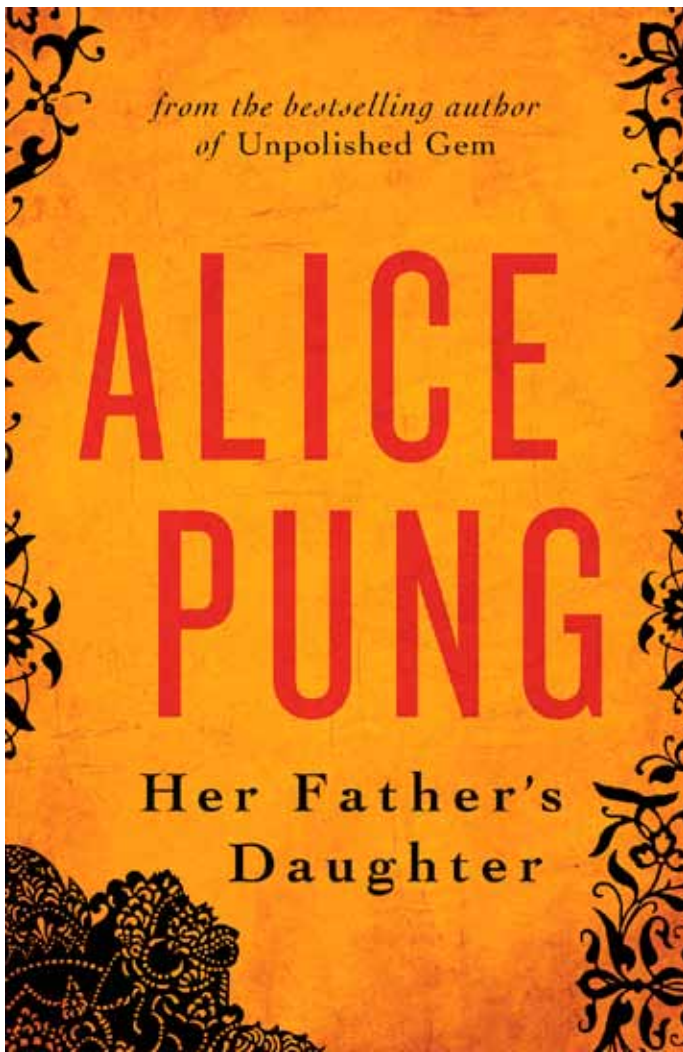
Dr Tess Brady is a highly respected editor, researcher and teacher of writing at university level. She was the co-founding editor of the international online scholarly journal *TEXT* and has published children's picture books, adult radio drama, crime fiction, short stories and popular non-fiction. Her most recent publication is *Creative Writing: Theory beyond practice*, with Nigel Krauth.

### Catherine Gough-Brady *Director*

Catherine Gough-Brady is a documentary maker. She has made works in a variety of media. This includes radio features for the ABC, educational vid-

eos, online interactive websites and advertising. You can find out more about her by visiting <http://www.snodger.com.au/catherine/>





As Pung digs into her father's story, she embarks on a journey of painful discovery: of memories lost and found, of her own fears for the future, of history and how it echoes down the years. Set in Melbourne, China and Cambodia, this is a story about a father-daughter relationship.

### Discussion

- Pung talks about how the small size of the Chinese cup makes the conversation more succinct. Write a conversation that would take place over a Chinese cup of tea, and then write the same conversation as it would take place over a mug of tea. What were the differences?
- There is a quote from TS Eliot's *Four Quartets* at the front of the book. Read the entire poem and discuss why Pung chose this excerpt.
- Using the internet and the library, research other stories, or images about genocide survivors, for instance the Holocaust or Rwanda. What are the similarities between these stories, what are the differences?
- At the core of adaptation the essence of the work is transferred from one form to another. How would you adapt this book into a play, a song or a film? What, for you, is the essence of the text? What characters and scenes would you keep? Discuss your ideas with the class.

## Her Father's Daughter

This is a story about the resilience of the human spirit.

We expect that some people will physically survive genocide, but come away emotionally scarred. Remarkably Pung's father's love survived the Killing Fields and this is why, for Pung he is a true survivor. He is one who survived emotionally.





*"Alice Pung is a gem. Her voice is the real thing." —AMY TAN*



## Alice Pung *Unpolished Gem*



## Unpolished Gem

Set in the working-class suburb of Footscray in Melbourne, Alice Pung's memoir recounts her childhood. It explores her cross-cultural experience, her relationship with her mother, and the pressure of being successful at high school.

This is an original take on a classic story – how a child of immigrants moves between two cultures.

It combines the story of Pung's life growing up in suburban Footscray with the inherited stories of the women in her family – stories of madness, survival and heartbreak.

The book uses comedy to help us empathise with the characters and we are asked to look at Melbourne with the eyes of a new visitor. Pung helps us to see everyday things differently.

### Discussion

- Pung did not want to create a traditional migrant narrative: the characters undergo great hardship in their original country; flee to a new country; after much effort have a successful life. Why did she not use this narrative arc?
- Imagine that your English language skills are that of an eight year old, how effectively would you be able to communicate? Would you be able to express your adult ideas? Break into groups and try and discuss depression in the language of a child. Were you able to do it? What were the restrictions?
- Write an essay on what you believe you will do with your life. Is this different to your family's expectations?
- Choose a chapter and adapt it into a script for a film. Did you use the dialogue from the chapter? How did you adapt the descriptive passages?





## Growing Up Asian in Australia

This is an Australian story. It is a book about Australians who grew up in Australia, within Asian families. Like Pung they are multi-lingual, some of the writers were refugees, some were migrants.

The book includes short stories, cartoons, excerpts for other books and interviews.

Alice Pung has arranged the works into themed sections, some of which are designed to evoke Australiana: Strine, Pioneers, Battlers, Mates, UnAustralian? These sections re-inforce that the stories are Australian stories.

The works in this book are not all from writers, they include works from the chef Kylie Kwong, the filmmaker Tony Ayres and the designer Jenny Kee.

### Discussion

- Pick three works from the book. Identify where the works refer to Asian culture and traditions. Then discuss the question ‘Is there is one Asia?’
- Why do you think that Pung chose to organise the works into the themes? Draw up a list of themes you would have chosen and explain your choice to the class.
- In a PowerPoint identify words that have entered our language from Asian cultures. What are these words: nouns, verbs, adjectives? Are they slang? Explain to the class why you feel these words have come into common usage.
- Can an individual’s decisions and life choices, be influenced by the family and the country in which they live? Is one more powerful an influence than the other?





# THE KISS

## PETER GOLDSWORTHY



## The Kiss

Two drunk teenage boys, Tom and Kenny, decide to go to the town's water tank and plunge in. One of them will not make it back alive.

You can download the short story for free from Peter Goldsworthy's web site.

*The Kiss* was performed at Belvoir in Sydney along with short stories of the same name by Guy de

Maupassant, Anton Chekhov and Kate Chopin. You can read about the performance at <http://www.abc.net.au/arts/stories/s3227997.htm>

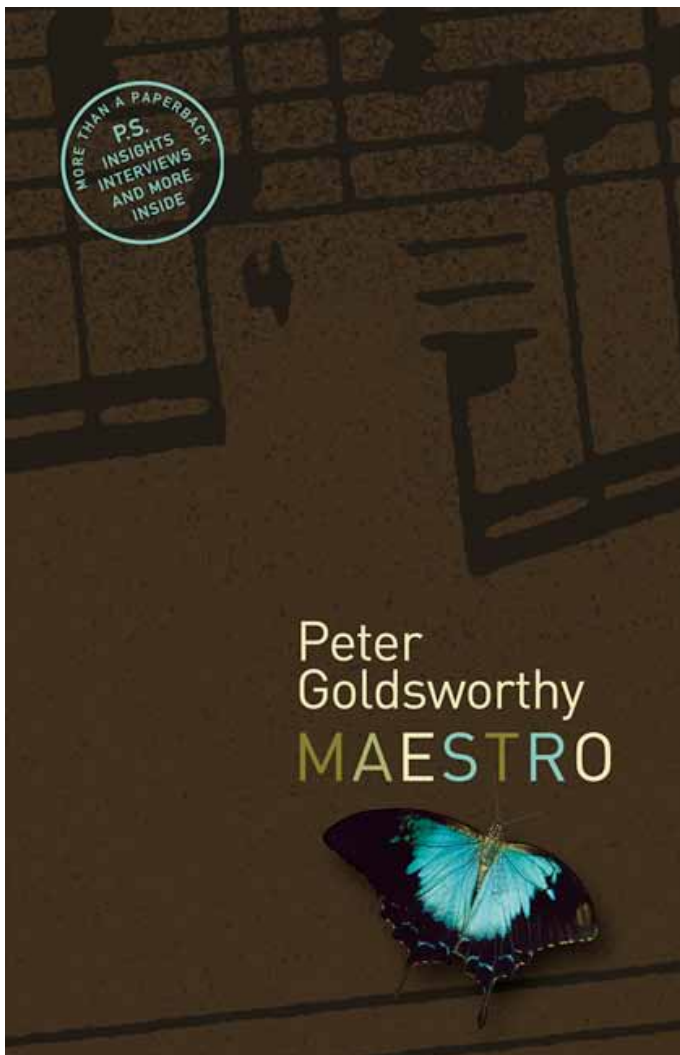
The short story was adapted into an award-winning film of the same name by Ashlee Page. You can find out more about the short film at <http://thekiss.net.au/>

### Discussion

- Watch the short drama adaptation of *The Kiss* and discuss the changes that were made by the filmmaker. What difference did it make to change the gender of the characters?
- Discuss why *Maestro* and *The Kiss* are both set in Darwin. What does Darwin of that era bring to Goldsworthy's writing. Can the city be described as a character in his work?
- Why did Goldsworthy want Ashlee Page to keep the homoerotic tension in the film adaptation of the short story?
- What literary devices did Goldsworthy use to guide us towards Kenny's final act of survival. In the end, are we sympathetic or horrified by it, or both?







## Maestro

This novel is an obituary written by the character of Paul on the death of his maestro, Keller.

Keller believed in music and its transforming power. He once believed in his great gift as a concert pianist and felt this protected him and his family from the force of the Third Reich. But it didn't, and that scarred him physically and emotionally.

Paul finds Keller in a self-imposed exile in Darwin, a cultured man awash with the swirl of beer and the wolf whistles of the front bar. What a complexity of emotions Paul feels for Keller.

In those early years Paul saw Keller was someone to mock and be suspicious of.

We can see the two characters as representations of different worlds and times. Keller represents the despair of old Europe, Paul can be seen as representing the promise of the New World. As Paul matured and the two men began to share more understanding a relationship formed. What emerged was a platonic love based on respect.

You can find more extensive teacher's notes at the back of the book.

### Discussion

- Who is the real hero in *Maestro*? Discuss.
- We see Keller through Paul's eyes. Analyse and critique Paul's memory of Keller.
- In *Maestro*, Keller's death is metaphor for the ending of Paul's self-deception that he will be a great pianist. Discuss.
- In a novel so engaged with classical music why did Goldsworthy introduce a rock band? Discuss this as a narrative device.





guage. It is core to our being.

In almost all of Goldsworthy's novels he's used the first person narrator. In *Maestro* the book is written from Paul's point of view. Yet he is an unreliable narrator. Goldsworthy says he discovered this method of writing when he read Saul Bellow's novel *Herzog*.

Goldsworthy is a poet, short story writer and a novelist. He came to writing novels relatively late. For him writing a novel is often like going on a journey through a maze – he is not sure where he will end up.

### Discussion

- Read Saul Bellow's *Herzog*. Compare and contrast this with Goldsworthy's writing.
- Goldsworthy uses a first person unreliable narrator in most of his work. Discuss how this affects his novel structure.
- Pick one of Goldsworthy's works and discuss how you would adapt it. What form would you choose, what would you change, and what would remain the same.
- Identify three metaphors in Goldsworthy's writing and identify how each metaphor was used and what it may represent.

## Writing

Peter Goldsworthy works as a medical doctor and sees death more often than most of us. It is little wonder that he often writes about death and applies it as metaphor.

Metaphor is possibly the most essential ingredient of art and communication. Goldsworthy says: as humans we are hot-wired for it and it precedes lan-







acters to build.

Our heroes are dispatched to Egypt and then to Gallipoli and engage in the disastrous attack at the Nek. A miss-managed firing schedule and communications breakdown has Frank desperately sprinting to get the message through to stop the attack while Archy obeys orders and goes over the top of the trenches to a certain death.

The film depicts the blind obedience generated by the commands of war and its dreadful waste and destruction.

### Discussion

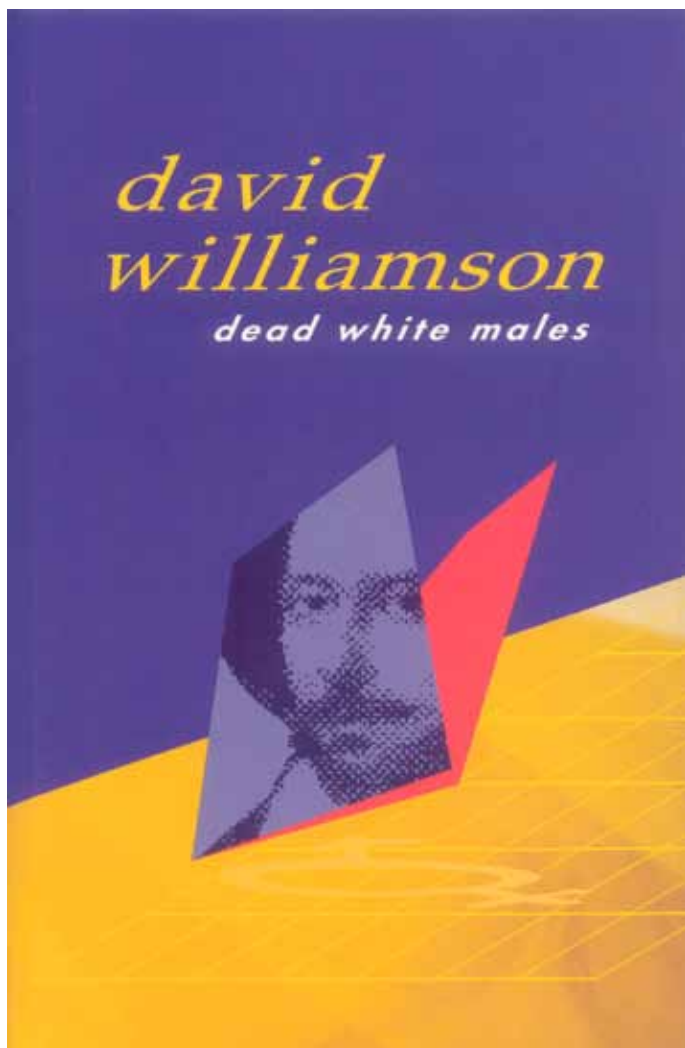
- Mel Gibson described the film as: "Not really a war movie. That's just the backdrop. It's really the story of two young men." Discuss.
- From the video interview were you surprised to hear that David Williamson, as a school boy, would make fun of the war veterans, but later, as a playwright, when he heard their stories, changed his mind? Interview members of your local RSL, ask them why they fought, was it for Queen and Country or as Williamson discovered, *to not let their mates down*? Make a PowerPoint presentation highlighting one story you have heard.
- Williamson describes writing film and theatre as two different languages. From watching the interview list the main attributes of writing film. What others are you aware of? Share your work with the class.
- Williamson explains that the laws of narrative don't neatly follow the laws of history. Discuss the implications of this to an historical narrative made into a film.

## Gallipoli

Sometimes viewed as one of the greatest Australian films, *Gallipoli* depicts the iconic Australian story of the Anzac and was directed by Peter Weir.

Frank Dunne, (played by Mel Gibson) and Archy Hamilton (played by Mark Lee) are two Western Australian sprinters from very different walks of life. They enlist to fight in the Great War. The first third of the film is set in Australia which allows the char-





## Dead White Males

The play opens dramatically with the university lecturer, Grant Swain, shooting Shakespeare. Swain says: “Literature is *never* about wisdom” (p6) and teaches a particular jargon-filled form of post modernism.

His student Angela struggles with Swain’s views and tries to apply them to her family’s story. In the meantime, Shakespeare appears to her and argues his case. Into the structure of the play are woven some of Shakespeare’s own scenes including the wedding in the Forest of Arden from *As You Like It*.

This is one of the few Williamson plays that shuns naturalism. It is also one of the few where he comes down heavily on one side of the argument. The structure is tight. The beginning is arresting and the play keeps up this pace.

The play ends with Swain shooting himself in the foot.

It is a goading and satirical play. When Williamson

wrote this work writers and theorists were already on opposite sides of the conceptual barricade. The play produced outstanding box-office returns, remaining a favourite with audiences, but at the time it also generated vocal attacks from some of the academic sector.

### Discussion

- In groups, choose a scene from the play and perform it for the class. Explain why your group chose that particular scene.
- In the video interview William comments: “We have deep universal human emotions.” Discuss.
- In *Dead White Males* Mellisa says: “... You get much better marks if your teacher’s arguments are so lucid and compelling that you have a full on, high voltage, conversion experience.” (p71). Discuss.
- *Dead While Males* uses layers of secrets. Discuss how the revelation of these secrets helps to build the characters and develop the plot.
- Form teams and debate: *Great literary works are never best-selling fiction*.
- Can we ever know the truth? Discuss with reference to either play.
- Design the set for a scene from the play. Use a storyboard and explain how your design enhances the play’s themes.
- There is often music associated with the performance of a play. Design the music for act 2 of the play. Explain why you have chosen these sound tracks/sounds.







now is facing an uncertain future. He does not want change but it is being dumped on his. In desperation he says: “We’re like some cargo cult, all of us in this city. Sitting on the floor of a quarry, lighting fires and hoping someone’ll come down and save us.” (p86)

The woman he loves wants to change. She sets herself goals which are unrealistic and uses his money to attend a course to re-model herself so that she can become a hostess in the grand new resort being built. But her transformation is too big a task for this short course, no matter how hard she tries. We feel for Barbara. She’s duped by the suggestion that the modelling course offers an easy fix. Real change takes longer. In a wonderful speech she expresses her need for change: “And I don’t mind Housing Commission, I never have, but we’ve all lived in each other’s pockets for too long. I’ve won every prize at bingo, I’ve borrowed every decent video, and I’m starting to go off the football...” (p5)

#### Discussion

- Compare Barbara’s predicament to films like *Educating Rita* where a working class woman changes her life via education. How is Barbara’s solution different and doomed to failure?
- Is the character of Den too trusting? Discuss.
- ‘I didn’t want to write about victims.’, Katherine Thomson. Examine the role the characters of *Diving for Pearls* play in their own downfall.
- Do you think *Diving for Pearls* is an angry play?

## Diving For Pearls

This is a play about change played out on the industrial stage. A factory is shutting down, not because it is inefficient or is running at a loss, but because the real estate values are too high to have a factory on that site.

Old values such as loyalty and hard work carry for nothing. Den is the nice guy, the quiet plodder who has worked all his life, he has not skilled-up and







A quick search will also bring up both Hannie Rayson's reply to critics and some of the negative and emotional criticism the play generated. Rayson's reply is in *The Age* April 19, 2005. It should be remembered the play is not a documentary drama.

The play is about power and corruption. It is an essay in evil.

We do not want to be distracted with the details of the real SIEV X story (the deliberate sinking of a boat full of refugees), as terrible as it is. Here we should focus on the debate about how anyone could do that kind of thing to another human. We know that throughout history such acts of barbarity have been carried out. Rayson asks, could we do this? Are we in Australia immune to this form of evil?

This play is a tragedy, in the traditional sense. It illustrates how this form of drama can act as a powerful tool to question the arguments of governments who propose that the ends-justifies-the-means.

### Discussion

- What does *Two Brothers* tell us about power and the psychology of decision makers?
- What does Rayson claim was the starting points for *Two Brothers*?
- Make a list of the events and issues that are the focus of *Two Brothers*.
- Use the internet to learn more about the issues that are debated in *Two Brothers*.

## Two Brothers

*Two Brothers* is a very important play in the history of Australian theatre and culture.

To see how close the response to this play came to changing the government funding for the arts see David Marr's interesting essay: The Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture, *Theatre Under Howard* (<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/legacy/programs/sunmorn/stories/s1524958.htm>).



# The Writer's Context

Are writers interested in the resolution of conflict? Working in a group, take a work you are studying and trace the way the writer sets up, and complicates, the conflict. Does the writer then resolve the conflict? Map this on a chart.

Drawing on one of the works you are studying determine how the writer's experience of, and attitudes to, the world in which she or he lives has influenced the construction of the text. Work in a small group to complete the analysis. Develop a PowerPoint presentation to communicate this information to the class.

Use the internet, critical essays and commentaries to compile a detailed summary of the contexts that shape the writer's work. Discuss your findings with others in the class.

# Views and Values

'Family provides Rayson with a deliciously dysfunctional group of people varying in age and jobs and sometimes social background.' Discuss the validity of this claim by drawing on one of Rayson's plays. Why do you think Rayson uses family as a platform to explore complex ideas and issues?

Do you think Williamson's plays or films have the power to move the audience into a deeper understanding of themselves and others? Do we identify with the characters or is it the situation which captures our imagination, or both? Discuss in class.

The dissident walks through Thomson's plays – the whistle-blowers, the unionist and the activist occupy her stage. Complete a detailed analysis of one of Thomson's dissidents. Turn your analysis into a monologue in which the character articulates his or her views and values.

Pung and her siblings primarily speak English, but their mother speaks a dialect of Chinese, what difficulties would this create in the family dynamic?

As a group, discuss how in Goldsworthy's story, *The Kiss*, Kenny reacted to the death of his friend Tom. What would you have done to survive?

# Critical Perspectives

After attending a live performance of a play write, in point form, the kind of review you think would be helpful to other students. Discuss what you would include and leave out of the review if you were only allowed 3 points.

Use the Internet, critical commentaries and reviews to arrive at a detailed knowledge and understanding of the critical reception of a writer. What viewpoints do you support? What viewpoints do you refute?

# Analytical Responses

The following topics could be used for written text responses, debates, panel discussions and online forums.

Williamson has been writing plays for over 30 years and has become the voice of his tribe. Discuss.

We all share human emotions, they are universal. Discuss.

'The courage of ordinary people is at the heart of Thomson's writing.' Discuss.

'Hannie Rayson writes middle class theatre about middle class characters directed to middle class audiences.' Is this a fair criticism of Rayson's body of work?

Alice Pung writes Australian stories about Australians. Discuss.

Paul, in Peter Goldsworthy's *Maestro*, is an unreliable narrator. Discuss.

