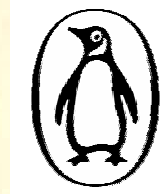


Teachers' notes
Written by Pam Macintyre



Bye, Beautiful by Julia Lawrinson

It is January 1966 and Sandy is going on fourteen when her family moves to a dry, wheat belt West Australian country town from Perth, during a dusty summer. Laurence (12) and Marianne (17) are her siblings, Glad, her mother and her father, Frank, is the local policeman, a man whose children fear rather than love. No explanation is given as to why Frank has been moved to the town, though his reputation as a hard man of principle can be read as a factor.

Glad has to steel herself against some small town attitudes, and the girls find the town hot and oppressive. This mood is set up from the beginning, helped by the sad and intriguing prelude – why is Frank Lansing mentioned alongside the grieving family?

Much is unsaid in this beautifully written and constructed book. The reader must look at how the characters behave to understand the relationships and attitudes. There are complex interactions that involve racial prejudice, romantic jealousy and small town perceptions and attitudes.

It is a time of change in Australian society – ‘the swinging sixties’ are about to challenge many of the social conventions documented in this story - feminism, black power, anti Vietnam demonstrations, the pill and mini-skirts are just over the horizon. Towards the end of the novel the Commonwealth Referendum of 1967 passes which ends constitutional discrimination against Aboriginal people who are since then counted in the national census.

This adds to the poignancy of the story.

Bye, Beautiful is a rich, emotional novel that is ideal for literature circle discussion or extension group work. It deserves more than one reading, as there is much to notice and understand on subsequent readings.

Title

Consider the multiple meanings of *'Bye, Beautiful'* after you have read the book.

The 1960s

The book is redolent with attitudes and behaviours of the time which provide a distinct contrast with attitudes and values of the present. Society in the 1960s is patriarchal, and the rank and role of women and girls are very different from today. This is an interesting and important aspect of the story and deserves some discussion. It might be worth considering how different Marianne's life might have been had she been born forty years later.

Further research such as looking at Australian magazines and newspapers of the time, and the television shows (television – black and white - came to Western Australia in 1959) might be fun and useful. This might be done before or during reading to heighten the sense of this period in Australian history that is so powerfully evoked in the book.

Invite students to identify those attitudes/behaviours/events that most strike them as anachronistic, or ones they were not aware of.

- What do they reveal about the period?
- Why has society changed so much?

Below are some examples, but students might identify different ones:

- p18 Frank wouldn't let Glad drive *'of course'*.
- p19 *'She was accustomed to Laurence coming first in their parents' affections, and Marianne and Sandy, being girls, tying for second place...'*
- p19 Dot Read says regarding Marianne's engagement: *'Better than going teaching or nursing and then ending up on the shelf, if you ask me'*. What is *'being left on the shelf'*? What does it tell us about Dot?
- p21 Sandy and Marianne's room is the *'sleep-out'*. What is this?
- p22 The girls can go to the pool but must be home before their father gets home for tea. They are not driven anywhere but must walk. Do they have more or less freedom than now do you think?
- The young people in the book often eat a bag of mixed lollies. Would they be likely to be eating these now?
- p35 *'wireless'* rather than radio, *'record player'*.
- p35 Frank has control over how Marianne combs her hair. Find examples of hair styles from the period. What does back combed look like?
- p36 Why does Frank not allow his daughters to wear shorts *'in front of the house'* and insist that Marianne keep her hair *'off her face'*?
- p78 Glad to Laurence: *'They're [adults] your elders and your betters...Remember that, Laurence'*.
- p82 Frank says to Laurence *'You will not speak until and unless you are spoken to, is that clear?'* And on p83 to Marianne *'You're not too old for me to tan your backside'*.

- p93 Frank belts Sandy for being *'rude'*, to a policeman's wife, when she was being honest. This importance of *'appearances'* is a constant thread in the story with the girls being made aware of their being the *'copper's daughters'*. Does this suggest that the 1960s were a less honest and open society than now?
- p99 What was the *'conscriptio*n' that the men were talking about? Students might like to research (or talk to family members about) 'draft dodgers', 'draft resisters', 'anti-war protestors', and/or read Michael Hyde's *Hey Joe*.
- p100-101 Sandy *'...had been far more keenly aware of the privileges that Laurence was awarded for the mere fact of his being a boy'*.
- p101-103 Discuss the attitudes towards Indigenous Australians that Bill reveals during his telling of the story of Pat Read. Also consider the language that Bill is using – casual, unthinking racism.
- p104 What was *'Native Welfare'*?
- Sandy thinks *'their [May and Billy] tanned skin, their glossy hair - these were because they were part Aboriginal, they were not just ordinary features that were neutral'*. And later *'...their colour signified something different than mere exposure to the sun'*. Discuss the implications of this.
- p155-6 The discussion of the effects of the Depression – some students might like to research this time in Australian history, or ask relatives who lived through it.
- p257 Why doesn't Glad go to visit Marianne in Perth? Discuss the reasons. Does she no longer love her daughter? Is she ashamed of her? Is she frightened of Frank? Does she 'choose' Frank over Marianne? What are the possibilities? How would you feel if you were Marianne?

Dialogue

What people say to each other in the story, compared to the language, tone and tenor used today, is most revealing of changed attitudes and times.

Write the conversations you have at home with your parents and/or siblings and compare with the dialogue in this book. And/or compare the dialogue in the book with that in a novel set now.

p75 Pat says of May *'They tell me she's a smart one, that one, but smart won't get you very far if you're acting like that'*. Consider how well written the dialogue is – that the words chosen would have been spoken then. Translate this – and any other selected examples – into how it would be said now.

Also there is much adult conversation that Sandy can't understand, such as that on page 78 about Aboriginal Pat Read marrying into a white family. This exchange reveals how subtly racism is revealed in the novel, as does the teacher's comment (p79) about May appearing *'sly'*.

The Sunday ritual of Church attendance

- p40 Church attendance is part of the social hierarchy in the town, even if, as Sandy observes, few seem to be engaged spiritually.
- p73 The church is a centre of the community, not only for its religious practices but also as a social ritual with a cup of tea and conversation afterwards. Do you think churches still play this role in society?

Historical events

There are several significant historical events that occur during the course of the novel that are worth remarking on:

- Introduction of decimal currency (how much was a shilling worth?)
- 1967 Commonwealth Referendum
- The Vietnam War is the background but only impinges in passing on the lives of these young people and Sandy only has a vague idea of communism (p74)
- p35 The temperature is still in Fahrenheit – 103 degrees – how hot is this and when did we convert to Celsius?

Music

- p67 What is an HMV minigram? Marianne only has two 'records'. What are 'records' and compare her two with your cds or iPods.
- Play some of the music that is referred to in the novel, such as on page 174 - The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Easybeats. Why have some groups and their music survived to the present and others not?

Recreation

- p108 Describes going to the drive in and playing on the equipment. Are there still drive-ins? Why might they have largely disappeared?
- The town's children also frequently go to the local swimming pool. Has that changed do you think? If so, what has replaced it?

Characters

Bye, Beautiful is inhabited by strongly drawn, complex and memorable characters. All are filtered through Sandy's observations and experiences, but there are always aspects that surprise her or that she doesn't fully understand.

Frank is a complex character, tough and authoritarian with members of his family (p50 he slaps Laurence at the breakfast table, and Glad's reaction is to ignore it). (Students might to compare him with the father in the film *Kenny*). However, he can be charming to outsiders (p83).

- p84 gives a sense of him as a young man, the author showing he is complex and full of contradictions, as well as being shaped by

circumstances. He is conscious of his and his family's position in a small town.

- p10 He is rude to his wife, but on p38-30 clearly in love with and appreciative of his wife. He makes all the decisions in the family.
- p70 Professionally he is hard line and critical of the previous incumbent who had *'Tried to be a social worker'*.
- Frank is also unpredictable. Page 71 for instance, shows us he knows about Marianne's shoes but lets her off and agrees to buy sandals for both girls.
- p123 He wanted to be a gardener but sacrificed that aim, to policing because of the need to provide for a family.

Because we mainly get at Frank through Sandy, it is worth looking at what others say about him and who is saying it. For example, on page 166 Constable Bates says *'He's got the right ideas about things'*. Why does this have an ominous effect on the reader rather than a comforting one?

- Discuss students' reactions to Frank. Is he admirable/deeply flawed/constrained by circumstances/dislikeable/detestable?

Glad is taken for granted by Sandy so that is how she appears in the novel. This is perceptive writing: Sandy is shocked at Glad's depth of feeling over her mother's death, wonders at the girl who read the annuals she finds, at a person who had a life before she was Frank's wife and Marianne's, Sandy's, Laurence's mother.

Glad is very much a woman of her time who remains loyal to her husband's decisions, even the harshest punishments of her children. She schools herself to be the good, supportive copper's wife, but one wonders at what cost. This is not explored in the novel as it is beyond Sandy's experience to understand or even be aware of, but might be worth speculating on with readers, especially why Glad would be so acquiescent.

Marianne, at seventeen, is engaged to Peter Taylor who is left behind in Perth and with whom she *'has gone all the way'* (p46). Confident, sure of herself, aware of her attractiveness Marianne doesn't do what is expected of her. She is beginning to query the way things are and the hypocrisies embedded in keeping up appearances: *'Oh, yes, appearances are the most important thing in the world. That's what we've been brought up to believe, and that's the truth. Isn't it?'* (p184).

She is disdainful of her younger sister. For instance on page 153 she says to Sandy *'You never do anything on purpose'*. We only see her selectively through Sandy's eyes. She takes over their shared sleep-out, and regularly stops speaking to Sandy. In that relationship she is powerful. But despite her beauty, spirit and love for Billy she is defeated by Frank and small-town narrow-mindedness.

- Do you think Marianne is punished for her relationship with Billy - for transgressing morally, in society's eyes, for transgressing racially in the

eyes of the town, and familiarly from her father's perspective?

Sandy. *'Everything was out of time'* (p68) sums up Sandy. Although the story is told in the third person it is filtered through Sandy as the focaliser. In a tradition of young characters in fiction before her (such as Harper in Sonya Hartnett's *Thursday's Child*, Matilda in Ursula Dubosarsky's *The Red Shoe*, Stephen in Michael Frayn's *Spies*, even back to Maisie in Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*) she is the invisible child but one who notices and observes closely an adult world she doesn't always understand. For instance, Sandy is aware of how different her mother and sister are in public conversations than within the family (p25). A possibility for further exploration might be the pursuing of the limited child observer device in fiction, its effects and purposes.

We get little of what others say or think about Sandy but on page 47 Marianne says that Sandy is scared of Frank, smarter than she and Laurence put together and unaccountably apprehensive. Do you agree?

Awkward, shy Sandy feels she is cast in the shadow of her more beautiful and confident sister and sees herself as someone people don't notice. But as the novel progresses so does Sandy's understanding and awareness of the moral and emotional complexities of the adult world, until her final grasping of what happened to Billy at the railway siding (p248).

This is not a sudden shift from childhood certainties but a gradual one that might be explored as it is revealed in the novel. For instance, on pages 105-107 her understanding of the world has shifted. This shift is symbolised in her first period (p132) and it is Frank who has to explain menstruation to her.

- Why was this aspect of maturation kept so secret? Marianne didn't even tell her. Do you think there is significance in Frank having to explain Sandy's menstruation, rather than her mother?

At the end Sandy wears a mini-skirt (p257). Students might like to think about any similar moments in their lives and/or locate other pivotal or accruing shifts for Sandy.

Billy opens the book, but we don't know it is him until he is introduced by name on page 27.

- Why do you think the author chose to describe his death before the story proper opens?
- How differently do you read that opening prelude once you have finished the story? What weight does it give Billy?

Again we only get Billy from the outside as observed by Sandy who is besotted with him.

- Is she viewing him through rose-coloured glasses?
- What do you make of him – a show off aware of his beauty and charm? (p31 and p169) - doomed, tragic figure?

Consider that Billy's death has a wider significance beyond the town, the time and the personal. What symbolic meaning might you find in it?

Laurence. Sandy calls him a '*know-it-all*' (p78) and he plays little role in the story other than to contrast his freedoms with the constraints on his sisters.

Pat Read does not feature strongly, but Sandy observes her at church. She is kind and understanding (p75) and supports Marianne when her own mother abandons her.

- She is presented perhaps as constrained by circumstances. Do you agree?

May Read is one of the most interesting cameos in the book. Unlike her mother who is accepting of their position in the town, May is angry and determined to confound the town's expectations.

- Why do you think they are so different?

Dot Read is close to a stereotype of a bigoted, narrow minded town gossip, but is remarkably prescient about Marianne (p77). Consider how she and Bill react to Billy's death.

- What do you make of their change of heart? Is it genuine?

Miss Masterson is a truly awful teacher who humiliates the students. On page 60 Sandy witnesses racism towards May but can't quite grasp its significance. P62 Sandy can't explain why Miss Masterson's '*unfairness bothered her more than any other teachers' unfairness*'. There are such hints about taken-for-granted racism all through the book.

The men have sexist reasons for Miss Masterson's behaviour, but consider that her ambition has been frustrated because of gender constraints as expressed in the men's response to her.

- Has she become someone who oppresses others because she feels she has failed to fulfil her hopes for herself?

Relationship between Marianne and Sandy.

One important thread of the story is the sisterly interactions. Marianne is not interested in her younger sister, but again she comes to us through Sandy, and Sandy is jealous of Marianne's attractiveness to Billy. Perhaps a revealing activity would be to write an exchange, such as that on page 109 from Marianne's point of view.

Sandy feels she is being used by Marianne as protection against her father.

- Do you agree? Is Marianne selfish? Is she hypocritical, '*not the kind of girl she made herself out to be*' as Sandy thinks. Or is Sandy simply jealous of her independence?

The relationship between the sisters changes when Marianne is in trouble (p212). She confides in Sandy and needs her support.

- Is this the test of sisterly love? Consider that Sandy visits her in Perth though there is little indication of a continuing relationship.

An interesting companion book would be Katharine Paterson's *Jacob Have I Loved* about sisters in a different time and place, but with similar relationships and jealousies.

Visual imagery and vivid writing

Bye, Beautiful is a very visual book and there are various scenes (for example, when the Lansings arrive, the description of the main street with its parentetic pubs at either end, the swimming pool, p23 and p126 when Sandy walks to the garage) that would be rich examples for students writing an evocative, descriptive piece about a place familiar to them, or for translating those descriptions into images, either drawn, modelled or computer generated. Perhaps old photographs could be examined and used to create a pastiche.

- What has changed now in country towns? Have students describe, in the style of Lawrinson, one they are familiar with, or they can create an actual image – drawn, computer generated or modelled.
- p87 Sandy hated seeing the rear of shops: *'it was like catching an accidental sight of someone's underwear, or walking behind the screen of a puppet show and seeing the puppeteer crouched there, sweating and uncomfortable'*. Invite students to describe the view from a train journey – 'hidden' rears such as backyards of houses, lanes, backs of buildings, and consider the reactions it generates.
- p118-199 Description of Nanna's house.
- p122-3 Sandy's description of the Lansing's house. Would Marianne/Glad/Frank describe it differently? How?
- Invite students to write a description of their house/flat etc from the point of view of one who likes it, and then one who does not.

Fashion

What the girls were allowed to wear, as well as what they wore, tells us much about how things have changed.

- p159 Marianne's dress made from nylon with a hem *'above the knee'*. Consider that the miniskirt was not long away.
- p159 Sandy had not had a new dress in a year.
- p161 Marianne is allowed to *'practise'* with an old lipstick of her mother's when Frank is not around.
- p169 Billy and Taffy wear *'stovepipe pants and crisp white shirts'*.

From the descriptions available, create the clothes that the characters wear.

Food and drink

This is carefully researched and like the clothes provide insights particularly into family life of the period.

- pp17-18 The Lansings go to the *'grocery'* (there is no supermarket). What is bought – are the items still available? Invite students to search the internet to find old advertisements, labels, etc or look at old family photos, visit museums etc.
- p36 Even though it is so hot, the family eats peas, mashed potato and chops – two for Frank and one for everyone else. They frequently eat a cooked breakfast.
- p154 describes the food for the dance.
- p91 Dot asks for a *'shandy'* – a woman's drink. What is it?
- p92 Glad puts out her new height-of-fashion *'Tupperware wheel'* with segments filled with peanuts, olives, cheese squares, pickled onions, *'rolled slices of polony held together by toothpicks'*. What would the food be today and how would it be served?

Sayings

- Frank: p10 *'empty vessels make a bloody din'*.
- Glad to Laurie p50 *'pride comes before a fall'*.
- Ask students whether there are favourite sayings in their (extended) families? Is it more likely to be the older generation that says them?

Attitudes towards girls and women

All of the following are worth discussing and perhaps students can canvass the older generations of females in their families for their experiences.

- p96 Glad wants her daughters to finish school, not necessarily for their futures but so that they can help their children with their homework. The role for women and girls is very much as homemakers. When did the push for careers and further education for girls begin?
- p96 *'Married women will be allowed to teach soon, something we never would have dreamed of in my day'* says the school principal Mr Kane.
- p97 The Reverend says *'God created women to honour and obey their husbands...And of course, to bear the weight of original sin...as long as they don't neglect the spiritual development of themselves and their families, I don't think God would really object to them having received a bit of education along the way'*.
- Can you imagine the conversations on pages 96 and 97 taking place today? Why don't the women speak up for themselves?
- p131 Sandy is not allowed to go out without Marianne, though Laurence is allowed to go out by himself – *'Laurence is a boy'* says Frank. Why is there a double standard? How does Frank have such authority that Sandy doesn't argue her case and the inequality of the situation?
- Frank threatens Marianne that if she doesn't pass her leaving he won't give permission for her to be married and she will have to wait until she

is 21. Is that still the case? What is the legal age to be married without parental consent? Do males need it as well as females?

Who do you agree with?

- p184 *'If people concentrated on their own lives and let other people get on with theirs, there'd be a lot less problems in the world.'* (Marianne)
- *'Sometimes people look out for other people for good reason. To stop them from doing things they're not supposed to do.'* (Sandy)

Does who says this in the book influence what you agree with?

Aboriginal Australians

Lawrinson never preaches and never lets this aspect of the novel dominate, so readers need to be alert to subtleties.

- p107 The white and Aboriginal children do not mix at school, except for sport.
- *'...a part of a race that was dying out, according to common agreement, and therefore deserving of pity'.*

How and why have attitudes changed? Find out about the Land Rights Movement, Eddie Mabo, Bringing them home: of the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

- What has precipitated such a change in attitudes to Indigenous Australians?

Plot

This book is so seamlessly constructed that its thorough plotting is worth examining. It relies on readers absorbing the carefully observed, constructed and sequenced elements of everyday life until they realise the awful consequences of prejudice, narrow-mindedness, hypocrisy and oppression.

Below are some stages in the plot that warrant discussion, but you and your students may identify others.

- There is also a valuing of modest lives well-lived as in Pat, Billy and May Read, and the Lansings are 'decent' people aren't they?
- Ordinariness is no protection against tragedy. It may well be a cause. P97-98 shows Constable Bates's (himself awkward and pimply) admiration of Marianne, and readers prepare themselves for the consequences of spurned love, and jealousy. Indeed, on page p175, Constable Bates cannot take his eyes off Marianne but notices her mocking giggles with Carol at his expense.
- There is a clear sense of a gradual building to the catastrophic event evoked in the prelude: the tense relationship between Sandy and Marianne, and prejudices in the town. The tension builds towards the dance as the pivotal event – we know that things are going to come to a head.

- p166 Sandy makes a '*terrible error*'. Why might the author have used this ominous and portentous adjective? In what senses are Sandy's words '*terrible*'?

There is a sense that the book is divided into two halves: Before and after the dance.

- p188 Constable Bates knows what is going on and so does May. Is Marianne selfish and self-centred? Or does love believe it can conquer all? Why do Marianne and Billy have to keep their love secret?
- p194-5 Frank humiliates Constable Bates by telling him his daughters are off limits and Sandy wonders if Bates's feelings are being repressed. The rebuke exacerbates simmering resentments, jealousies and secrets.
- p203-4 All the '*natives*' have to be off the streets by six. Bates threatens Billy – because he is jealous – any other reason?
- p206 Marianne is pregnant.
- p216 Billy's optimism – is it misplaced? Does he not understand the deep jealousies and racism in the town from powerful people?
- p218 Frank is powerful and Sandy cannot put aside her feelings of dread.
- p221 Marianne and Billy's love for each other is revealed in the worst possible way in a most powerfully written scene. Frank feels humiliated by his daughter and says she has thrown her life away. What does he mean?
- p226 Consider the last phrase in this chapter: '*...defenceless against the person who did*'. Invite students to predict what might be going to happen, with supporting evidence from the book.
- Last chapter – what do you make of the final scene in the church? Has the book been about Sandy all along rather than Marianne?
- What is the future for both of them? How do you know?

Debate

- 'Billy's death is directly attributable to the actions of Sandy.'
- 'The coroner's verdict is an act of racism.'

Billy's Death

- Who is responsible for Billy's death? Whose version do you believe – the official one or Sandy's (pp249-251) and which version of the events at the railway siding do you think is most plausible?
- Does the reality of the circumstances of Billy's death shock/move you? Do you think such an event still happens in Australia? Students might like to trace the reports of and controversy over the case of Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley and his role in the death of Mulrunji Doomadgee in the Palm Island watchhouse in November 2004. Life following fiction?
- p252-3 Why do you think the author wrote the death of Billy in this way? What meaning do you attach to the '*quarter moon reflected as a*

whole, white circle in his pupils? How is she inviting you to respond to events?

- What do you think of the town's attitude of 'Let sleeping Dogs Lie' even though they know there are unexplained discrepancies in the coroner's report?
- Why does May call the Lansings murderers? Is she right? Are they all equally responsible? Or is Billy's death just a terrible accidental tragedy?

General Discussion points

You might like to invite discussion of the following in terms of *Bye, Beautiful* and/or a wider societal context.

- p85 *'They say a good copper's the kind of bloke who'd've made a good criminal,' Frank said. 'You've got to think like a crim to catch a crim.'*
- p206 *'...telling the truth was not always desirable, and ...the truth was best portioned out selectively'*
- p210 *'...she understood how hard-won such ordinariness was...'*
- p262 *'...that's what you get from being a copper's daughter, you learn how to lie. That's the thing we do best, isn't it Sandy?'*
- p263 Marianne's response to Sandy's apology is *'We've all got a lot to be sorry for'*. Who is she referring to? Are you the reader included?

Insightful

The insights in this book are acute and mature, preparing young readers for the kinds of perceptions they are likely to find in adult literature. Below are two striking examples. Students might like to identify others that capture their experience, or that surprise them with their insight.

- p121 *'Her irritation at her sister required Marianne's presence in order for it to retain its foothold: without it, the irritation fell away, leaving Sandy feeling blank and insignificant, acutely aware of the strangeness of this dry, quiet place, and her position as an outsider within it.'*
- p140 Sandy's reaction to Nanna's death: *'She felt tears heat her eyes, and she wished she, too, could feel something about Nanna'*.

Related reading

In addition to those already mentioned:

- *Lockie Leonard* is a copper's son in coastal Western Australia in the trilogy by Tim Winton, but Mr Leonard is a very different policeman to Frank Lansing. Comparisons might be fruitful.
- Phillip Gwynne's *Deadly Unna* and *Nukkin Ya* also deal with small town racism, are set in the 1970s, told from a boy's point of view and make an interesting contrast. The film, *Australian Rules*, is a composite of the books.
- *White Ghost Girls* by Alice Greenway is set in Hong Kong during a similar period, with the Vietnam War as a backdrop and is about two sisters, one a tear-away, the other more like Sandy.

- *Nights in the Sun* by Colin Bowles is also evocative of an older Australia – of Broome in the 1920s – a very multicultural Australia when the rest of it wasn't.

Students could be asked to consider just how many Australia's have there been, and are there? What is their Australia?



JULIA LAWRIINSON

Bye,
Beautiful