

My Brother Jack

Study Guide for mid secondary–tertiary students



Jack (played by Simon Lyndon) and David Meredith (played by Matt Day)

The Australian author George Johnston is recognised as one of Australia's leading literary figures. His acclaimed novel **My Brother Jack** was first published in 1964 and has featured in middle to upper secondary school curricula for many years.

The two part miniseries presents the memories of the series' narrator David Meredith and is a story told through the eyes of adult David. Now living on the Greek Island of Hydra, David is isolated from his emotional and physical past and able to reflect and offer a commentary born of hindsight, that touches on personal growth as well as social, historical and political issues. The series presents an insightful representation of Australia and Australians in the post First World War, Depression and Second World War years. **My Brother Jack** offers teachers' material to encourage interesting, invigorating and relevant classroom activities for the middle to upper secondary school years.

Curriculum Links

My Brother Jack will be relevant to students of Studies of Society and the Environment (SOSE), English, Health and Physical Education, English, Media and Film Studies and Civics and Citizenship Units. Many of the activities set out below are based on an integrated curriculum approach drawing on general English skills as well as content understanding from other disciplines.

Before Watching My Brother Jack



Mr Meredith returning from the War
(played by William McInnes)

Part One of the series opens with a scene showing David Meredith's father's return home from the First World War. His father is not physically injured and returns home by boat with hundreds of other surviving soldiers.

- Imagine you are the Director of the series and describe the scene that you would create.
- List five words that you believe describe soldiers of war and list five words that you believe describe war. In what way do the opening scenes of Part One of the series fit into the lists you have made?

EXPLORING THE CHARACTERS

A number of the characters depicted in **My Brother Jack** serve to represent different social groups or stereotypes, that are both particular to the time in which the miniseries is set, as well as being relevant to current day society.

- Choose three characters from the miniseries and describe the dominant aspect of their personality. If you were to transplant each of these people into current day Melbourne, describe what you think each of these characters would be like. For example: where would they live? What would their hobbies be? How would they dress and what sort of job do you think they would do?
- List three characters in the mini series that you believe had a strong influence on David. In what way did each of these people influence David?
- The story is told through David's eyes and as a consequence a great deal of the narrative comprises reflection from David about some of the people in his life. Choose one of these characters and write a short description of David from the perspective of this character.

David



David

As the narrator of the story the experiences and perception of David is central to the miniseries. David is the youngest in a family of three children growing up in the middle class South-Eastern Melbourne suburbs. David idolises his older brother Jack for possessing certain characteristics that he does not. David is both intelligent and talented, although slightly awkward and emotionally stunted- he is still trying to find his place in the world. As a journalist and writer he finally realises where his future lies.

- Write your own description of David:
 - as a boy and young man (as seen in Part One of the series); and
 - as a man (as seen in Part Two of the series).
- In what way does David change from the first to the second part of the series? What are some of the characteristics of David that appear to remain constant throughout his life (as it is represented in the series)?
- Describe David's relationship with his father. How has David's relationship with his father influenced his view of war?
- Why does David use the name Sunstail when he begins writing stories for the Morning Post?
- What world does Sam introduce David to? How would you describe this world and in what way was it different from the world that David had grown up in?
- Choose two events (one from each part of the miniseries) that in your opinion were turning points for David. Justify your choice with reasons.
- Why does David begin to become dissatisfied with his life in Part Two of the series? What do you think David means when he says that his life was not "*authentic*"?
- Gavin Turley warns Helen Meredith that David is "*not safe*". What do you think he means by this?

Mr Meredith



Mr Meredith

Mr Meredith is presented in the series only as a returned soldier battling with the demons of war. He is a violent and aggressive man who has difficulty communicating with his children and wife.

- What is your first impression of Mr Meredith? Does the character of Mr Meredith change between the first and the second part of the series and if so in what way?
- Describe the relationship between Mr Meredith and his family. In what way are the women in the Meredith family treated differently to the men? Give two examples to justify your view.
- David describes his father's world as being "*a constant reminder of the price of glory*" and that "*glory had [for his father] curdled in the tram sheds*". What does David mean by each of these two statements?

Jack



Jack and David

Jack is David's older brother who presents as a happy-go-lucky, positive and spirited character. Throughout the story Jack chases work around Australia and across the world to Chile, determined to make his fortune. Despite constant bad luck and opposition Jack largely remains proud and cheerful.

- Describe the character of Jack. How is he different from David?
- Why does Jack decide that he wants to enlist as a soldier in the Second World War? What experience does he feel he can gain from war that he has never had before?
- How does Jack's personality change when he is not able to fight?

- During Part One of the series Jack tells David that he must learn to always "*have a go*". Give three examples from the series that demonstrate Jack living by his own advice.

Gavin Turley



Gavin Turley (played by Robert Menzies)

Gavin Turley is a Special Writer at the Morning Post working with David. Gavin is cultured, intelligent and perceptive and he and David develop a strong friendship.

- The actor who played Gavin Turley in the series, Robert Menzies, describes Turley as a truly civilized man. Why do you think he describes Turley in this way?
- Give two examples from the series that show that Turley is both intelligent and perceptive.
- Why does Turley describe David as having "*no guarantee in him*"? What do you think Turley means by this? In what way do we find out that he was right?
- Why does Gavin tell David that he is not a "*real*" writer? How do you think this affects David?
- Gavin describes David as a pomskimmer. What is a pomskimmer and what do you think Gavin means by this?

EXPLORING THE STORY

Return from the war

The first few scenes of Part One of the story present opposing images of war which are to recur throughout the series. The glory of war is presented in Part One with the grand return of soldiers from the First World War, and the opening scenes of Part Two show the fanfare and honor bestowed on returned soldiers on Anzac day. These scenes are contrasted with the day-to-day hell which David's father survives and the horror David witnesses in New Guinea.

- What are the impressions of war that we gain from the series? What does David mean when he refers to the war's "*tragic undertow*"?
- At what point in the series do we first realise that David's father may have come back a changed man?
- How is war generally represented in the media? Compare the media available during the First World War and the media involved in reporting the 2003 war on Iraq. How has the role of the media in war times changed? What role does the media play in educating people about war and how do you think the change in media has affected peoples' perception and knowledge of war?

David's childhood and family life

- David describes his memories of childhood as a "*mess of memories and impressions*". What does he mean by this?
- Why was David indentured with a lithographic firm? What does it mean to be indentured?
- Why do you think Mr Meredith beat his boys? Why didn't Jack stand up for David and stop the beatings? What affect do you think this had on David?
- Why did Jack not accept the money David offered him?
- In what way does David's relationship with his family change in Part Two of the series?

Arts School and Sam

- What type of people did David meet at art school? In what way were these people different to people he had met before?
- How would you describe the first meeting between David and Helen at Sam's party? How does this differ from the second time they meet? How is David different?
- What is symbolic about David buying the typewriter? In what way did this action affect David's life and experiences?
- Why do you think Sam and Jack get along so well?
- In what way did Jessica's murder affect David? How would you describe his actions surrounding this tragedy? Why does he realise that his actions are wrong? Do you think that David was able to forgive himself for denying his friendship with Sam?
- Sam tells David that he must be "*ready to betray everything you are comfortable with*" to ensure that he does not become like his father. Explain what Sam means by this statement. Do you think that David is able to do this? Justify your answer with examples from the series.
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Work at the Morning Post

- Why was Mr Brewster surprised when he first met "Sunstail"? Describe the type of person that you think Mr Brewster would have expected Sunstail to be.
- Why did David feel like an imposter at the Morning Post?
- What type of newspaper was the Morning Post? What do you think its modern day equivalent is?
- Why is David disliked in the reporting room?

The Bonfire

- What did the bonfire scene at the end of Part One symbolise?
- Describe David at the end of Part One of the series. In what ways has he changed from the David we see throughout the early stages of the series? Describe the character that we are presented with as we go into Part Two of the series.

The Anzac Day March

- Why was Anzac day always a day of "*mixed feelings*" for David?
- David covers the Anzac Day march for the Morning Post and wins a front-page placement for the story he has written. What does David mean when he reflects on the story he has written and states that "*whatever [he] felt had to be buried in the required chauvinisms of the story*"?

The Experience at Port Melbourne shipyards.

- Why was David sent to Port Melbourne to report?
- What does he see at the shipyards and how does this affect him?
- Why were the man and woman at the port being put back on the ship? What was happening in Europe that made these people in particular want to stay in Australia? Compare the experience of these people with your knowledge of the current refugee policy in Australia.
- Why does David's piece on Port Melbourne get rejected at first? Explain the difference between a "news piece" and an "editorial". Use the scene at Port Melbourne and write a short news piece describing the scene.

David's relationship with Helen

- In Part Two of the series David describes himself as the "new David Meredith". What do you think he means by this? Why do you think he is not able to be the "new David Meredith" with Helen?
- How does David behave when he first takes Helen to meet his family? Why do you think he behaves in this way?
- David tells Helen that he wants what she wants - do you think this is true?
- Why does Jack feel hesitant about Helen?
- What does David mean when he says that he and Helen stood together "reinvented".
- Compare the relationship of Peggy and Gavin with Helen and David - in what way are the relationships different?
- What did David mean when he said that he made Helen "suffer for his own cowardice"?
- Why does David finally explain to Helen that he will leave her? Imagine you are David the day before leaving Helen and write a letter explaining your thoughts and feelings.

The Night at the Turley's

- What happened at the Turley's that made David start to question his life?
- How do we start to see the change in David after this night?
- What does David mean when he refers to his life and house of Beverly Grove as "a facsimile of real life"? Why does he start to pine for his childhood home of Avalon?
- What does the sugar gum tree represent to David?

The Outbreak of Second World War

- Why does David want to join the war? How and why is Brewster able to stop him?
- Why does Jack feel he needs to join the war? Why does Jack see the war as an opportunity and something that will change his life?
- Jack refers to the "propaganda" written by David. What is propaganda? What does David mean when he says that the nation must have its myths? What is some of the propaganda surrounding the war in Iraq?
- David is sent to Port Moresby as the Morning Post's war correspondent. David describes himself as being a "writer of hymns to national pride". What does he mean by this?
- After being in New Guinea David was transferred to New York, London and Rome to continue writing. He sensed that he had begun to sever ties with his homeland and countrymen and began to appreciate the difference between himself and other men his age. In what way was David different?
- Upon David's return to Australia why does Mr Brewster state that he no longer wishes to lecture David on loyalty and duty?

Cressida Morley

- What was it that attracted David to Cressida Morley?
- Why does Gavin leave the table with David and Cressida?
- Why do you think that David felt that Cressida could offer him a life that was “*authentic*”?

My Brother Jack presents a number of issues and themes that can be considered in a modern day context. In particular, constructs and myths surrounding war are highlighted in the series and can be considered in relation to the recent war in Iraq. Media representation of the war in Iraq may be used in conjunction with **My Brother Jack** as a basis for deconstruction of wartime images and presentation.

Written by Kristine Darmody. © 2003 ACTF