

XOUM

*John Dale*

# PLENTY

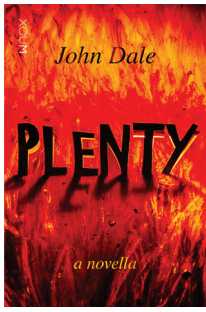
**XOUM  
PUBLISHING**

**TEACHERS' NOTES**

Recommended for  
ages 13—17 years

*a novella*





XOUM PUBLISHING TEACHERS' NOTES

TITLE: PLENTY

AUTHOR: JOHN DALE

NOTES BY ROBYN SHEAHAN-BRIGHT



RECOMMENDED FOR AGES 13–17 YRS

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### KEY CURRICULUM AREAS:

English; Humanities and Social Sciences (Civics and Citizenship; Economics and Business) VALUES: Tolerance, Maturity, Selflessness, Independence

### FURTHER READING

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## PLOT SUMMARY

*'Le sens commun est fort rare.'*

Voltaire

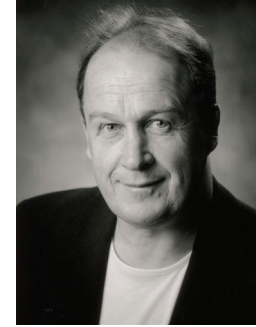
*'Maybe it was our isolation that had landed us in this mess, after all.'* (p 129)

This novella is a reflection on many subjects. It may be about small towns and how they feel threatened by outsiders. It may be a moral fable about Australia's response to refugees and how as a small country we respond often in a small-hearted way. It may be about a conflict between big and small, between power and lack of power. It may be about how city people diminish and undermine the idea of community in smaller regional places. But it may also be about the fact that sometimes we surprise ourselves by our responses to challenges, and that really we have no idea why we feel threatened at all.

*Plenty* is also a paean to growing up on the coast in a small town which seemed to have very little to offer at all to its residents. But what it had, mattered to Jed, the narrator, and what it lost, eventually drove him away. There are no happy endings in this novel. There are no tragic ones either.

The writer creates a suggestive scenario in which his readers ponder questions of identity, belonging, tolerance, bigotry, hypocrisy, loss, and memory in a small book which canvasses very big issues.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

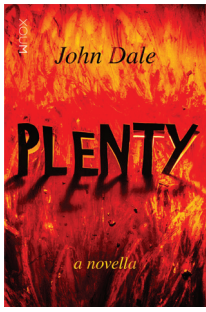


John Dale is the author of six books including the bestselling *Huckstepp*, two crime novels, *Dark Angel* and *The Dogs Are Barking*,

and a memoir, *Wild Life*. He has edited two anthologies, *Out West* and *Car Lovers*, and co-edited a third, *Best on Ground*. His most recent novel, *Leaving Suzie Pye*, was published in 2010 and translated into Turkish. John teaches writing at UTS and lives in Sydney. His website is:

<http://www.john-dale.net/>





## WRITING STYLE

### *Title, Cover and Blurb*

The book's title and cover might lead your students to form some perceptions of what the novel is likely to be about.

**Activity:** Discuss the perceptions they formed before, and then how they changed after reading the novel. Then design and write a new cover and blurb for the book.

### *Novella Writing*

A novella (derived from the Latin *novellus* meaning 'young' or 'tender') is a more condensed literary prose form than the novel. It is a refined art capable of achieving maximum emotional impact in fewer words.

**Activity:** Invite students to write novellas, and to enter competitions such as the annual Somerset Celebration of Literature Novella Competition [http://www.somerset.qld.edu.au/celebration/literature\\_competitions](http://www.somerset.qld.edu.au/celebration/literature_competitions) OR Express Media's range of awards for young writers <http://www.expressmedia.org.au/forum> OR The Novella Project *Griffith Review* <http://griffithreview.com/the-novella-project-2-call-for-submissions>

### *Point of View and Narrative Perspective*

*Plenty* is written in the first person, past tense. The narrator is recalling these events with the benefit of hindsight and maturity.

**Discussion Point:** How might this narrative have differed if it had been written from a third person omniscient perspective or from another person's first person perspective? Imagine, for instance, if Chrissy Nickels had described any incident in the novel.

### *Rite of Passage (Bildungsroman) Narrative*

This novella, like many works with a teenage narrator, is about a rite of passage from childhood or adolescence to adulthood. See 'Bildungsroman' <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bildungsroman>

**Discussion Point:** What are the key events or emotions which force the narrator into an awareness of adult perceptions of life, and a growth in maturity?

**Activity:** Compare this novella to other classic or contemporary works of rite of passage eg *Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger; *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee; *Boys of Blood and Bone* by David Metzenthen; *Confessions of a Liar, Thief and Failed Sex God* by Bill Condon; *Jasper Jones* by Craig Silvey; and *The Piper's Son* by Melina Marchetta.

### *Descriptions of Landscape*

Description in this novella is enhanced by the use of vivid, carefully observed, often surprising details, for example:

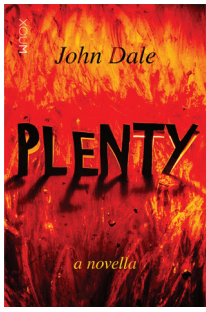
'Around Christmas it would rain for weeks on end. The drains would overflow, washing raw sewage into the sea. But I liked it: after a big downpour, the pavements and parks gleamed like glass and shrikes and noisy miners filled the trees, feeding on slow-moving insects. The travel magazines in Mum's bookcase would curl at the edges while bloated leopard slugs crawled across the floor and up the asbestos sheeted walls of my bedroom.' (p 3) OR 'Outside, the warm air dried the stains on my T-shirt. The moonlight brightened the bay and the small boxy houses clad in fibro and corrugated iron huddled together under the stars. We passed the statue of a digger with a broken hat. In the distance, a cattle dog ran through a yard grasping something feathery in its teeth.' (p 115)

**Activity:** Analyse the way these two passages work. Then invite students to observe their own landscape and to write a description using original details in this way. Begin this exercise by brainstorming short phrases to describe all the senses (smell, taste, sight, touch, and sound) responding to the landscape. Then put those phrases together into an original and evocative description.

### *Similes, Metaphors and Other Literary Devices*

The writing of this novella is informed by the use of poetic literary device, for example, 'The sky was as blue as a lizard's tongue the next day.' (p 35)





**Activity:** Read the novella carefully and take note of other examples of similes like this one, or of metaphors, or of other literary devices such as personification, for example, 'I saw flames licking the sky.' (p 129)

### Humour

*Plenty* is full of humorous asides which are designed to cement the themes and ideas being conveyed more engagingly and forcefully, for example, 'In the whole town there were only nine people on unemployment benefits, and four of those were Finn Boyd and Lumpy Stevenson.' (p 103) OR 'Lumpy Stevenson and Len Nickels were whispering in a corner over some marijuana deal. Horrie Lester, who normally didn't stop jabbering until your ears were sore, laid his head on the crook of his arm. He was not used to strong liquor. Jack Rough and Barry Strange began exchanging shark stories, Sergeant Goodwin finished his shift and Trevor Sprigg went home to bed.' (p 115)

**Discussion Point:** Discuss the various humorous strategies available to a writer such as satire, irony, sarcasm, exaggeration, bathos, and black humour. Locate any examples of such strategies in this text.

### Conflict and Suspense

Conflict in fiction writing is generally essential to reader engagement and plot development.

**Discussion Point:** What other forms of conflict feature in this novel, apart from the major community conflict between the townsfolk, and the government policy to establish a refugee centre in their area?

### Newspaper Feature Writing

**Discussion Point:** Research and discuss the conventions of newspaper feature writing and how so much can be condensed either into a balanced view of a situation or into a biased one. Based on the lawyer's interview about the town's bigotry, the local journalists would have presented a damning view of the town's rejection of the detention centre, but not nearly as damning a view of the people in the town as was presented in Malcolm McGuinness's piece for *The London Times* (pp 141–4). He shouts the bar and gets 'his' version of the story about the 'culture of secrecy' at the centre (pp 108–114). But in the published article, he paints a terrible picture of the townsfolk. Was his article an example of balanced reportage?

### Characterisation

**Main Characters are:** Jeffrey (Jed) and his parents; Ashley Page and Bob, her father; Chrissy Nickels and Len, her dad.

**Minor Characters are:** Kade Jordan, Jed's friend; Mrs Peggy Powell, publican; R.D. Hogg, Shire President; Sergeant Goodwin; Ron Marney, the

butcher; Ted Sawkins, the newsagent; Bill Draper, who owned the Thai-Foon-Indian restaurant; Finn Boyd, who was always in and out of jail; fishermen, Jack Rough and Barry Strange; Celia and Duncan Hodder, who run the pie shop; Lumpy Stevenson; Horrie Lester; the blind refugee woman, Zhila and her son, Naseer; Reverend Fish and his wife, Jacqui; old Mrs Lewincamp; Jan Tenbensen; the city lawyer; Malcolm McGuinness; Postmistress Sprigg; Pam Coot and her daughter, Renee.

**Discussion Point:** Jed is the narrator and so gives us only the part of the story he wants us to know. What can you deduce about him as a character, from how and what he reveals of the action?

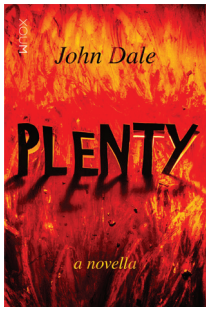
**Discussion Point:** Ashley and her father appear only in a few scenes in the novella, but are pivotal to the action. How would you describe each of them as characters? Why did Bob Page move to Plenty in the first place?

### Crossover Novels and Novellas

Many young adult fictions have been described as 'crossover' novels or novellas since they appeal to adults as well as to teenagers.

**Discussion point:** What is young adult (YA) fiction? Does it meet certain criteria? Are the best YA novels or novellas also appealing to adults? What books would you describe as 'crossover' and why? Read articles on the subject





(such as Sheahan-Bright, Robyn 'Crossing Over', *Magpies*, Vol 18, No 1, March 2003, pp 14–16, 18 or Stiefvater, Maggie, 'In Which Maggie Debates the Meaning of Crossover Fiction' June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012, <http://maggiestiefvater.com/blog/in-which-maggie-debates-the-meaning-of-crossover-fiction/>). See also Falconer, Rachel *The Crossover Novel: Contemporary Children's Fiction and its Adult Readership* (Routledge, 2009).

## KEY STUDY TOPICS

### *Refugees*

'Why us?' Horrie Lester said. 'Why not Garden City?'

'Because we're isolated, that's why,' my dad said. 'They can't escape from here.' (p 62)

The issue of accepting refugees or boat people has fuelled political debate since first settlement (or invasion) but has been particularly controversial in recent years. The average person is often confused, for example, 'How did the determination system work, why did some boaties get accepted quickly while others did not, why were our boys fighting and risking their lives in the same countries these boaties were fleeing, and even if someone did get persecuted across the other side of the world, why on earth should they come here and disrupt our lives? Where did their rights end and ours begin?' (p 105) Meanwhile, politicians often make cynical political mileage out of refugee debates and have spent billions on changes in such policies.

**Activity:** Invite students to research the recent changes in immigration policy and the various detention centres which have been employed to house refugees while being processed. Why is 'offshore processing' now being favoured? How does current political debate relate to the past, and to policies such as the *Commonwealth Restriction Act 1901* (commonly known as the 'White Australia Policy'), the first legislation passed after Federation? Study the use

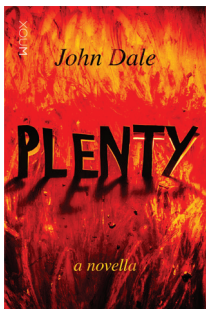
of language in these debates, for example, how do words such as 'processing', 'queue jumpers', 'boat people' dehumanise and deflect attention from the plight of many people fleeing violent regimes? Conduct a class debate on these and related subjects. [See **Further Reading** for useful online resources.]

**Discussion Point:** Discuss the fact that often there are economic incentives offered to towns and neighbouring countries, to convince them to take in refugees. 'I think there's a strong economic case to look at how these asylum seekers can assist our town. For every asylum seeker, you create three jobs. You need people to guard them, people to feed them, people to provide them with education and health services—' 'There's good money in refugees these days,' (p 63) Is the use of such economic incentives a form of bribery, in your opinion?

**Activity:** Read other fiction texts and picture books on the treatment of refugees and discuss in relation to the theme as it is canvassed in this novella. [See **Further Reading** for resources.]







### *Small Towns/ Rural City Divide/ Outsiders and Insiders*

'My childhood was the kind that city kids only dream about.' (p 3)

*Plenty* is ambivalent about the nature of small towns. On the one hand it reflects the narrator's love of the local environs in beautiful descriptions and nostalgic reminiscence, and on the other hand it shows the ugly, parochialism of the town and has the narrator finally leaving it forever. The narrator defends it from outsiders' prejudices in statements like, 'Just because we got drunk on Saturday night and let off steam didn't mean out-of-towners could look down their noses at us. We were just as good as any stuck-up private-school girl and her polo-shirted dad.' (p 21)

**Discussion Point:** What did you think the writer was saying about small town culture? How did you interpret this theme in this novella?

**Discussion Point:** Compare this novella to David Metzenthen's *Stony Heart Country* (1999) which has an outsider come to live in a small and hostile community. This novella explores how outsiders view the town of *Plenty*. But in one sense, the narrator is also an outsider, isn't he, since he seems capable of seeing the town as an outsider would. Conduct a unit on the theme of the 'outsider' in young adult fiction.

### *Racism and Bigotry*

'I guess what stung people the most was the Racist word, for all of us in town had grown up alongside Aboriginal families, unlike some city folk who wouldn't know an Aboriginal from an Indian.' (p 107)

Small towns are often criticised for being racist and yet this narrator refutes that, citing their tolerance to the local Aboriginal population.

**Discussion Point:** Was *Plenty's* response to the 'boaties' driven by racism or simply by fear of change and of potential shortages in an already impoverished area?

### *Government Bureaucracy*

'Another group of disaffected malcontents – my father, Horrie Lester, Len Nickels, Finn Boyd and Lumpy Stevenson – were distrustful of the word *government* being linked with the word *promise*.' (p 62)

This novella is about people who feel abandoned by big government and betrayed by local authority as well.

**Discussion Point:** Australia has three levels of government. Is this too much? Are we inevitably going to find ourselves in situations like the one portrayed in *Plenty*, where local needs are not met by those who are too remote to be fully cognizant of them, and where local councils are naively confident that their messages will be heard and acted upon?

### *Economic Decline and Unemployment*

'We had run out of fish and cedar and gold. We had even run out of fertile farming land as we had eroded the soil along the river and lowered the water table. Our town was at a crossroads.' (p 66)

The cannery, which opened after WWII, is closing, and the Shire President is desperate to find an alternative source of employment and income. Most of the resources in the area have been depleted and there are few economic options available.

**Discussion Point:** What does *Plenty* reveal about the economy of working-class or middle Australia?

**Discussion Point:** The narrator suggests (pp 117–8) that bad luck comes in waves and that there were premonitions of what lay ahead. Was the town of *Plenty* doomed by its economy, whether the refugees had arrived or not?

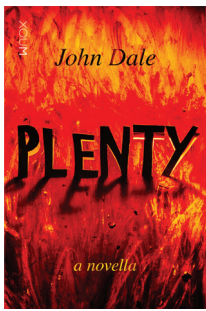
### *Aboriginal Heritage and Colonialism*

'But everyone's got a bit of blackfella in them round here. Bound to after all these years. *Plenty* was an Aboriginal settlement long before the first boats came.'

'And now the second boats are here.'  
(p 77)

**Discussion Point:** This novella offers a microcosm of the colonial settlement of Australia. Discuss what it reveals about the history of this white settlement.



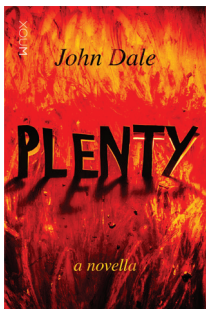


## KEY QUOTES

Choose one of the following quotes and discuss in relation to the themes which have been outlined above. Then write an essay on how this quote relates to the overall themes in this novella.

1. 'I think there's a strong economic case to look at how these asylum seekers can assist our town. For every asylum seeker, you create three jobs. You need people to guard them, people to feed them, people to provide them with education and health services—'  
'There's good money in refugees these days,' R.D. Hogg agreed, 'for the right town that is willing to help out the government.'  
(pp 63–4)
2. 'What I like about this town, the town I grew up in, the town my father was born in, and his father before him, is how you can walk down to the beach and have a swim, or take off for a weekend in the bush. What I like about this town is that we're not swamped with waves of bloody people. Tourists pass through, fill up, fiddle with their radiators, have a feed and they're on their way. But you start dumping boatloads in a place like this, you gunna lower the quality of life.' (pp 64–5)
3. 'Just like him, I didn't want Plenty to change either, but no-one had acknowledged the reason the cannery was closing, or why the mill had shut down. We had run out of fish and cedar and gold. We had even run out of fertile farming land as we had eroded the soil along the river and lowered the water table. Our town was at a crossroads.' (p 66)
4. 'The TV reporters wore Gore-Tex jackets and R.M. Williams boots to blend in with their idea of what they thought we wore.' (p 71)
5. 'It's given me a sense of belonging,' she went on. 'A sense of identity.' (p 85)
6. 'Coasties are not like city folk, nor are they like bushies. Coasties hang around the rocks, lagoons and inlets. They walk along the beach at dusk and swim in the surf before breakfast, they fiddle about with boats. Their cars and clothes are always silted and their sheds packed with kayaks, surf skis and long boards they no longer use. Their gardens are dead affairs with a water tank and maybe a purple or crimson bottlebrush sitting in the middle of a brown lawn.' (p 98)
7. 'Some of them wore veils and this infuriated people. If the asylum seekers wouldn't show their faces on our beach then how could we accept them?' (p 99)
8. 'He argued with the guards on duty and he rattled the wire and said this was a sad, sad day for the people of Australia. It was such a remarkable performance, Sergeant Goodwin told my father later, it was like we were watching a piece of theatre.' (pp 106–7)
9. 'Besides, Horrie Lester was no match for the Melbourne lawyer who was representing the asylum seekers in their high court challenge. We saw him regularly on the six o'clock news, speaking in sound bytes, shaking his head solemnly, a little man in a big hat who had an extraordinary ability to make everyone else feel heartless.' (p 121)
10. 'A psychiatrist from Monash university appeared on television and said that sending these asylum seekers to faraway detention centres like Plenty traumatised them, but she never mentioned the locals who lived here and had their lives turned upside down. Medically, the detainees were treated much better than the locals and blackfellas. That's what Dad said anyway.' (pp 120–1)
11. 'Like many adults my father confused his own economic prospects with the country's. The way he saw it, Australia was going downhill and these asylum seekers were a symbol of the decline, wave after wave of lean, able-bodied men breaching our borders and then whistling for their big, dependent families to follow.' (p 124)
12. 'There's nothing like the smell of burning eucalypts to focus the mind and bind a community together.' (pp 130–1)





## FURTHER READING

### Picture Books

Baker, Jeannie *Mirror* Walker Books, 2010.

Greder, Armin *The Island* Allen & Unwin, 2007.

Heffernan, John *My Dog* Margaret Hamilton Books/ Scholastic, 2001.

Lofthouse, Liz and Ingpen, Robert *Ziba Came on a Boat* Penguin, 2007.

Marsden, John and Ottley, Matt *Home and Away* Hachette, 2008.

Tan, Shaun *The Arrival* Hachette, 2006.

### Fiction for Older Readers

Condon, Bill *Confessions of a Liar, Thief and Failed Sex God* Woolshed Press, 2009.

Evans, Alwyn *Walk in My Shoes* Penguin, 2005.

Gleeson, Libby *Mahtab's Story* Allen & Unwin, 2008.

Gleitzman, Morris *Boy Overboard* Penguin, 2005.

Gleitzman, Morris *Girl Underground* Penguin, 2005.

Lee, Harper *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Vintage Classics) Random House, 2004, 1960.

Marchetta, Melina *The Piper's Son* Viking, 2010.

Metzenthien, David *Stony Heart* Country Viking, 1999.

Metzenthien, David *Boys of Blood and Bone* Penguin, 2003.

Salinger, J.D. *Catcher in the Rye* Penguin, 2010, 1951.

Silvey, Craig *Jasper Jones* Allen & Unwin, 2009.

### Further Resources for Upper Primary, Secondary and Teachers

'Bildungsroman' <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bildungsroman>  
Dechian, Sonja, Heather Millar and Eva Sallis (eds) *Dark Dreams: Australian Refugee Stories by Young Writers Aged 11–20 Years* Wakefield Press, 2004.

Dechian, Sonja, Jenni Devereaux, Heather Millar and Eva Sallis (eds) *No Place Like Home: Australian Stories by Young Writers Aged 8–21 Years* Wakefield Press 2005.

Do, Anh *The Happiest Refugee* Allen & Unwin, 2010.

Falconer, Rachel *The Crossover Novel: Contemporary Children's Fiction and its Adult Readership* (Routledge, 2009)

Pung, Alice *Unpolished Gem* Black Inc, 2006.

Pung, Alice *Her Father's Daughter* Black Inc, 2011.

Pung, Alice ed. *Growing Up Asian in Australia* Black Inc, 2008.

'Refugees' *The Literature Base* Volume 13 Issue 1 February 2002 pp 18–23.

Sheahan-Bright, Robyn 'Crossing Over', *Magpies*, Vol 18, No 1, March 2003, pp 14–16, 18.

Stiefvater, Maggie, 'In Which Maggie Debates the Meaning of Crossover Fiction' June 12th, 2012, <http://maggiestiefvater.com/blog/in-which-maggie-debates-the-meaning-of-crossover-fiction/>.

### Internet Resources on Refugee Issues and Human Rights

Amnesty International <http://www.amnesty.org.au>

<http://www.asrc.org.au/>

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre

(ASRC) <http://www.asrc.org.au/>

Children Out of Detention (Chilout) <http://www.chilout.org/>

List of Australian Immigration Detention Facilities [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Australian\\_immigration\\_detention\\_facilities](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Australian_immigration_detention_facilities)

Dudek, Debra 'Of Murels and Snigs Detention-Centre Narratives in Australian Literature for Children and Young Adults' *Overland* 185 2006 <http://www.overlandexpress.org/185%20dudek.html>

Managing Australia's Borders Location of Operational Facilities <http://www.immi.gov.au/managing-australias-borders/detention/facilities/locations/>

My Place [http://www.myplace.edu.au/aligned\\_resources.html](http://www.myplace.edu.au/aligned_resources.html) Television series based on classic picture book by Nadia Wheatley and Donna Rawlins (1987) about Australian multicultural historical evolution.

PEN <http://www.pen.org.au>

Refugee Council of Australia (ROCA) <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/> See also: 'Books and Novels on Refugees and Asylum Seeker Issues' ROCA <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/r/list-bk.php>

Refugee Camp in the Heart of the City <http://www.refugeecamp.org/>

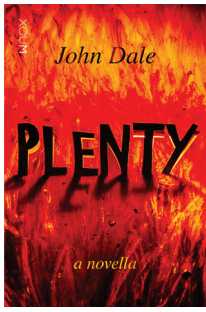
United Nations <http://www.un.org/rights>

US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) *World Refugee Survey 2005*

<http://www.refugees.org>







## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. In 2011 she was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld Branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, and in 2012 the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Australia.

## WORKSHEETS

### WORKSHEET – COMPREHENSION

Ask students to answer the following questions:

1. What sort of business does the narrator's dad run?
2. Who were the wealthy pioneers whose property is bought by Bob Page, Ashley's father?
3. What street do the local Aboriginal people live in?
4. What sort of work did Bob Page do before coming to Plenty?
5. What is Peggy Powell's hobby?
6. What illness did Jed's mother suffer from?
7. What newspaper does Malcolm McGuinness write for?
8. What is the name of the bigger town near Plenty?
9. Who does Chrissy end up marrying?
10. Who set the fire at the hotel?

**Answers:** 1. An Ampol service station. 2. The Mansfield family. 3. Raper Street. 4. A political advisor in Canberra. 5. She paints landscapes. 6. Emphysema. 7. *The London Times*. 8. Garden City. 9. Kade Jordan. 10. Jed.

### WORKSHEET – FURTHER ACTIVITIES & QUESTIONS

1. What else has John Dale written? Investigate information and reviews of his work online.
2. What other works deal with the issue of Australia's treatment of refugees? [Use the **Further Reading** list above as a start in compiling a reading list.]
3. What would you imagine the response to a detention centre being built in your area might be?
4. Invite your students to investigate the operation of detention facilities in Australia, and how they are managed.
5. Encourage creative responses to the themes in this novella. eg You might wish to **write a song** about the events it contains; **create a poster** for either side in the debate; **design a tourism campaign** for Plenty; **create a comic panel** based on one of the scenes in this book.
6. What was the most unexpected event in the novella?
7. Read the first chapter again, once you have read the entire work. How had your reading of it changed?
8. Why did Jed do what he did at the end of the novella?
9. What might become of Ashley Page? Has she really discovered a 'sense of identity'?
10. How would you describe the emotion Jed expresses in looking back on these events?

