

Specky



Teachers' Notes
written by Roger Watts

Specky Magee and the Boots of Glory by Felice Arena and Garry Lyon

Synopsis

This book continues where the last leaves off, with Specky going to the prestigious Gosmore Grammar on a scholarship. He soon finds, though, that this situation brings a number of unwanted pressures.

Firstly, he must undergo a series of initiations in order to prove himself one of the boys. Will he be able to do these tasks and avoid discovery by the staff, thus threatening his scholarship? More importantly, will he succumb to peer pressure and perhaps lose his integrity? Whilst there are times when Specky is willing to tell the truth and damn the consequences, this would compromise his new friend Tim, who, because of his family situation, is much more dependent on the scholarship.

Further, they realise that the outcome of the Boots of Glory football match is dependent on their success as players. This game is only played once every twenty-five years against rival school Salisbury College and Specky and Tim have been enrolled to fill vital team positions. The situation is made even worse when Specky finds himself being blackmailed over his part in the initiations to undermine Gosmore's chances in the big game.

Specky's new position in the private school generates rivalry with his old high school friends, and when Specky injures Johnny Cockatoo in a fierce football match against them, it alienates these old friends much further.

Specky's investigations into the mysterious blackmailer lead him to question a number of his closest new friends, until in a thrilling climax, Specky manages to thwart the blackmailer and through courageous behaviour on the field win the Boots of Glory football match for the school. In addition, he saves the crowd from injury when the horse Lancelot, the school's mascot, is spooked by lightning and runs amok.

Despite these heroics, Specky is summoned to the Principal's office. The blackmailer has revealed Specky's identity, and even though his friend Tim is guilty, Specky will not betray him, and as a consequence is expelled from the school.

Specky returns to Booyong High where he is rejected by his old team mates and despite the urgings of Coach Pate, Specky leaves the team he loved.

Introduction

This book is something a little different for Specky's fans. This book is much more of a mystery in which Specky has to deal with a range of problems including blackmail from within his own team, and it is not enough for Specky to take the winning mark in a Grand Final and all will be well. Even if football is a great preparation for life, the ending is a fairly controversial one that will stimulate interesting classroom discussion. It will require him to draw on a range of personal qualities in order to resist the pressure of his mates. The book suggests that it takes more than footballing ability to make it in the AFL. Specky will have to learn some hard lessons, but even if all seems to be lost he has the flexibility and determination to keep going and find another way to achieve his goal.

The student activities suggested here are suitable for a junior secondary General Studies class, and can be read in conjunction with the teachers notes provided with the earlier books.

English teachers will find Specky Magee and the Boots of Glory a valuable encouragement to reluctant readers, but the popularity of this series is not limited to this group. Girls and boys of all abilities will enjoy them. Several passages are offered for closer study, but most activities pick up on ideas in the text and encourage students to undertake further research in areas of interest to them.

Themes

Rivalry

The book is heavily involved in the football rivalry that persists between two private schools, Gosmore Grammar and Salisbury College, and of course this rivalry spills over beyond the football field. It shows the lengths people, students and staff, will go to in order to preserve tradition and reputation. Is too much importance attached to the Boots of Glory game? Well, *'this is not just a match...it's a battle we have to win!'* Of course Specky plays his part and tries to do it with integrity, but at the end of the book he is left with nothing except his self respect.

Public and Private Schools

At more than one stage Specky is drawn into conflict with his old school mates from Booyong High. They abuse him because he is now a *'true Gosmarian'* (p.95) part of a *'great traditional school'* and his friends claim he thinks he *'is better than (them)'* (p.96). However his new friends behave little better, *'no we don't think we're better, we know we're better,'* they sneer, (p.96) and after a bruising game of footy Specky is left embarrassed by the way the Gosmore boys celebrated their victory by singing the Gosmore song. He is seen to have *'crapped on his old mates'*. (p.103)

Telling the Truth

There are a number of critical scenes when Specky is called upon to own up to the initiation pranks he has been involved in. On the first occasion when Lancelot has been painted, Specky feels compelled to tell the truth and is rewarded for it by the Principal. The second occasion, though, is different. Stealing the boots of glory is too big an issue, and the consequences of telling the truth would be too great for Tim, so Specky is forced to lie. The result is that he is expelled, whilst Tim, who is the guilty one, is unpunished.

A corollary of Specky's "honesty" is seen in the way he plays his footy. He always attempts to be true to himself and this quality can be seen in the courageous way he fairly tackles both Smashing Sol and later Johnny Cockatoo. Unfortunately this last tackle injures his old friend who finishes up in hospital, and Specky's reward is to be alienated from his old friends.

Friendship

These critical scenes highlight the behaviour of Specky's friends, and it is a useful exercise for students to question the values of friends who try to bully and intimidate him, coerce him into stupid initiation pranks, reject him because of the school he goes to, and leave him to accept the punishment for their misbehaviour, even when his actions have resulted in their success.

For those who have seen the ABC presentation of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, there are a number of interesting comparisons to be made, particularly in relation to initiation practices and bullying. It is obvious that going to a private school brings with it a range of new pressures and some of these are explored in this book. At its heart though is the question of honesty and the need to be true to oneself. Specky has some difficult decisions to make and it is very hard for him to remain honest. The book's conclusion shows that in life, doing the right thing doesn't always bring a just reward.

Passages for Study

Into the Darkness (p1-5)

- What descriptive details in the first paragraph contribute to an air of mystery? - List four phrases.
- In paragraph 2 list four phrases that describe the setting for this book.
- Is this the kind of opening you would have expected for a Specky Magee book? Give a reason for your answer.
- How does Crusha talk? In what kind of book would you expect to find this kind of talk?
- The two boys talk about Specky. What impression is given of him? Is he seen as a threat or as a victim?
- How serious is this scene, or do you find it amusing? Justify your answer.

Pressure (74-77)

- Does the first sentence suggest that Grizza is alone in taunting Specky?
- Which phrase in the third paragraph tells you that Specky is not going to be intimidated by Grizza?
- Why does Grizza look back at the others for their reaction?
- How does Specky's football experience help him in this situation?
- Explain how intimidation is often a form of bluffing?
- From your own experience, does the same thing apply in life?
- What is the effect of Piggie's whispered comments?
- What does Grizza's behaviour suggest about Specky's tactics?
- What is the effect of Tim's behaviour here?
- Using your knowledge of the whole book, what other reason did Tim have for offering to 'think about' stealing the Boots of Glory?
- What is the 'holy grail of Gosmore'? Where does the term "Holy Grail" come from?
- Instead of continuing to refuse Grizza, Specky tells him he wants more time to think about it. What are Specky's motives?

Student Activities

Living away from home

- What are the problems of living away from home?
- Is it a good or bad thing to be away from parents?
- How do you go about making new friends?
- What skills does Specky have that make it easier for him to fit in?
- Would he cope if he wasn't a good footballer or did being a good footballer actually make things harder for him because it encouraged rivalry?
- What part did Grizza play in making it difficult for Specky to fit in?
- Write about a time you spent away from your parents.

Rivalry

Everyone attaches great importance to the 'Boots of Glory' game, even the College Principal who keeps the boots in his office. As the back cover blurb says, "*It isn't just a match,' he snapped, 'It's a battle we have to win! Don't you get it? Reputation and tradition are at stake here.'*"

- Does the book show that such rivalry is a good thing, or does it suggest that the two schools are taking things too seriously? Give reasons for your answer.
- How important is reputation?

In Shakespeare's famous play Othello, one of the characters, Cassio says,

'O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation, Iago, my reputation!' (II, iii)

Obviously he thinks his reputation is very important!

On the other hand, another character, Iago, says,

'Reputation is an idle and most false imposition; oft got without merit and lost without deserving.' (II,ii)

He doesn't agree!

- Investigate these two quotations.
- What do they mean?
- Check the meaning of the old fashioned words:
 - immortal
 - bestial
 - idle
 - false
 - imposition
 - oft
 - merit
 - deserving
- Do Gosmore Grammar and Salisbury College deserve their reputations? Consider the actions of both the teachers and the students. You might need to be clear about what sort of reputation you are going to discuss, for example on the football field or off it.

Tradition

The *'Boots of Glory'* game is played because it is a tradition between the two schools.

- Find out about different kinds of tradition.

There are a number of traditions at Gosmore Grammar:

Students chant the Gosmore song at the beginning of school assembly
The Boots of Glory Match is played every 25 years by Under 15's
Sir Lancelot parades before Gosmore football matches
All boarders go through an initiation before they can be accepted

- Are these good traditions, or do you think they should be changed?
- Give reasons why.

Some people spend a lot of time and energy preserving tradition, others spend as much time and energy trying to change it.

- Find an example of someone you admire who has done either of these two things and prepare a report for the class.

Decisions

Specky is called upon to make a number of crucial decisions, each one of which has unpleasant consequences for himself or others:

He paints Lance for the first initiation (p58)

He owns up to the Principal (p68)

He steals the Boots of Glory for the second initiation (p107)

He lies to the Principal (p141)

In the first game he ignores the letter telling him to only kick three goals (p134)

Specky collides with Smashing Sols in the game against Booyong High (p179)

Specky bumps and injures his best mate Johnny Cockatoo in the last seconds of the game against Booyong High (p183)
Specky refuses to dob in Tim (p249)
Specky decides not to play with Booyong (p259)

- In each case identify the factors that influenced Specky in his decision.
- What were the consequences of his actions?
- Would you have done the same?
- Give reasons why?

Telling Lies

'Specky had decided that he would always be honest when playing his football, and that he would try to live his life that way as well'. (p68)

Specky tries hard to be honest with himself and others, but circumstances make it very difficult for him to do so. For the most part, he succeeds, but after the second initiation he lies to Principal Stevens (p141) and later, although he doesn't tell a lie, he remains silent when he could have told the truth (p249).

When Pinocchio told lies his nose grew long.

- Actually there are physical consequences of telling lies. Look at Specky's behaviour when he lies to Mr. Stevens (p141).
- What physical reactions does he experience?
- In a small group, brainstorm your ideas about the consequences of telling lies.
- Share your ideas about the techniques people use to tell lies.
- Watch the news to see how politicians answer difficult questions. This, of course, isn't lying; it is called "spin" or "bending the truth."
- Is this kind of behaviour justified?
- How/why do politicians get away with it?
- Is it justifiable to tell a lie, or to remain silent instead of telling the truth, if being honest means that someone else is going to be hurt?
- Is there such a thing as a "white lie"?
- Write a piece about a person you know who told a lie. Try to show the effects of telling a lie.

Rules and Regulations

School rules

At Gosmore, Specky had great difficulty getting used to the rules and regulations (p9).

- In a school such as Gosmore why do you think these rules are necessary?
- What rules should be introduced at your school to make it a better place?
- Choose one that you consider important and construct a speech that explains why the rule should be introduced.

Student rules

Specky finds out that there is another set of rules for the students.

Grizza tells him, *'You think you're it and a bit don't ya, Magee? Well this isn't Poo-yong High. If you wanna be here you have to play by our rules. Get it?'* (p74)

In some schools a set of rules can apply to those students who want to be in the "in-crowd".

- Discuss the kinds of rules that apply in some situations.
- Write a humorous piece that describes what it takes to be one of the "in-crowd". Assume that it is much better to be an individual.

Initiation Ceremonies

Initiation ceremonies are used by many cultures, often to signify the coming of age. These are quite different to the kind of "pranks" that bullies impose on new students at school.

- Research an initiation ceremony and present a report to the class. Aboriginal Initiation Ceremonies from the Top End is an interesting web site that will get you started. It can be found at:
http://www.ozoutback.com.au/postcards/postcards_forms/abor_init_cer/
although you might like to choose another culture for your research.

Some of the most infamous and dangerous schoolboy pranks can be found in *Tom Brown's Schooldays* by Thomas Hughes. This tells the story of life at Rugby school in the 1830's. This school provides a model for boarding schools that still applies today, many features of which can be found at Gosmore Grammar. The book introduced the "cad" Harry Flashman, a coward, and a bully who later featured in a series of novels based on his character.

- Ask your teacher if you can see the video of Tom Brown's Schooldays that was shown recently on ABC television. There are many interesting comparisons to be made.

The origins of the game

The game of rugby is named after the Rugby School. A description of the game is given in Chapter 5 of Hughes' book. Here's an extract.

"Not he," said East, with some indignation. "Why, you don't know the rules; you'll be a month learning them. And then it's no joke playing-up in a match, I can tell you--quite another thing from your private school games. Why, there's been two collarbones broken this half, and a dozen fellows lamed. And last year a fellow had his leg broken."

Tom listened with the profoundest respect to this chapter of accidents, and followed East across the level ground till they came to a sort of gigantic gallows of two poles, eighteen feet high, fixed upright in the ground some fourteen feet apart, with a cross-bar running from one to the other at the height of ten feet or thereabouts.

"This is one of the goals," said East, "and you see the other, across there, right opposite, under the Doctor's wall. Well, the match is for the best of three goals; whichever side kicks two goals wins: and it won't do, you see, just to kick the ball through these posts--it must go over the cross-bar; any height'll do, so long as it's between the posts. You'll have to stay in goal to touch the ball when it rolls behind the posts, because if the other side touch it they have a try at goal. Then we fellows in quarters, we play just about in front of goal here, and have to turn the ball and kick it back before the big fellows on the other side can follow it up. And in front of us all the big fellows play, and that's where the scrummages are mostly."

Tom's respect increased as he struggled to make out his friend's technicalities, and the other set to work to explain the mysteries of "off your side," "drop-kicks," "punts," "places," and the other intricacies of the great science of football.

You can see the game being played in the video.

- There is an interesting link between the origin of Australian Rules football and Rugby School. Can you find what it is?

If you are stuck you can look at <http://www.iafc.org.au/origins.html> for the answer.

- Find some photos of early football games played around the time of the first Boots of Glory Match.
- Conduct research into the kinds of people who played the game, and those who watched it.
- Have the rules of the game changed since then?
- Write an imaginative descriptive piece about an early game of football.

Bullying

Is Grizza a coward as well as a bully? Specky deals with him by refusing to be intimidated.

'Grizza shoved Specky backward. Specky felt his heart race and his blood boil. There was no way he was going to let himself be intimidated. Specky stepped forward and shoved Grizza back'. (p74)

- Is this a practical way to deal with bullies?
- Read this passage closely and look at Grizza's reaction and those of the other boys. (See Passages for Study)
- What can we learn about bullying from these reactions?

Talk to the Animals

Specky seems to have a way with animals that enables him to approach and control Lancelot the horse. This is enough to convince Mrs. Nails that Specky is a 'good kid'. (p120)

Specky later puts this skill to good use when he controls Lancelot at the Boots of Glory match.

- How do you think he did it?

- Does he have special communicative powers - a kind of telepathy, or some other special ability?
- What does it take to communicate effectively with animals?
- Some people, (usually those who want to sell something) believe that animals can talk and you can talk back to your pets. Have a look at http://www.globalpsychics.com/lp/AnimalsTalk/animal_communications/menu.htm to find out about one such person.
- Investigate the ways in which humans communicate with animals and present a report to the class.

Eating the right foods

Garry Lyon explains how important it is to eat the right foods if you want to be a successful sportsperson (p79).

- Investigate the different food groups. There are plenty of resources available. Here are some starting points.
<http://www.foodwatch.com.au/shelp1.html>
http://www.nutritionaustralia.org/Food_Facts/Fact_Sheets/about%20_the_healthy_eating_pyramid.asp
<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/wcms/Publishing.nsf/Content/health-pubhlth-strateg-food-guide-guide2.htm>

The Australian Bureau of Statistics conducts research into what people eat. Their findings can be seen at

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/9a125034802f94ceca2568a9001393ce?OpenDocument>

- Conduct a survey of your own to find out what people are eating.
- With your teacher's permission you may conduct a survey of the school canteen to find out how well the different food groups are represented.

Statistics

Garry explains that the role of the statistician has become very important in football in recent years (p133).

- You can use the same techniques to improve your study habits. Success comes from what you do as much as what you are, so use a run chart to keep a record of how well you do things.
- Use a run chart to monitor your homework progress over a period of time. See the example below. You can easily modify the values for the x and y axis to something more appropriate.

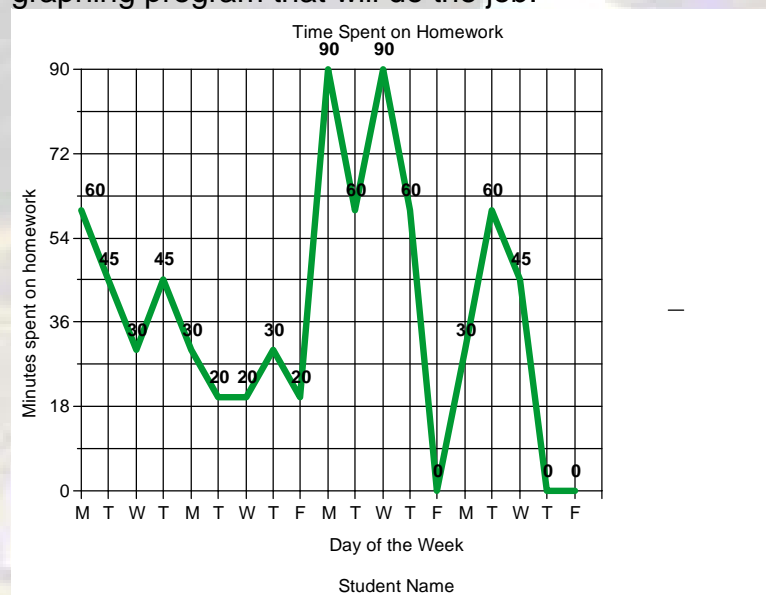
Felice Arena & Garry Lyon 

Organizing data: Determine the values for the x-axis (day of week) and the y-axis (time spent on homework). Below is a sample table of data for a 4 week period:

Week	Day (x)	Time Spent on Homework in minutes. (y)
1	M	60
	T	45
	W	30
	T	45
	F	60
2	M	30
	T	20
	W	20
	T	30
	F	20
3	M	90
	T	60
	W	90
	T	30
	F	0
4	M	30
	T	60
	W	45
	T	0
	F	0

Graphing: Using the appropriate scale, plot the y values against the x values. If you are familiar with Excel spreadsheets you can use this program to draw a graph.

Otherwise <http://nces.ed.gov/nceskids/index.asp?flash=true> has an excellent graphing program that will do the job.



- Use the graph to identify trends and to evaluate your behaviour, e.g. does this student have a consistent homework pattern?
- You can use run charts to evaluate other kinds of performance e.g. homework completion, homework grades, test results etc.

Families

- Compare Specky's family relationships with Tim's.
- How do Specky's parents react to his expulsion?

The Ending

- How do you feel about the ending of this book?
- Do you agree with Specky's Mum when she says '*Think of it as a lesson: that life is not all about fitting in with your mates and succumbing to peer pressure*' (p257) or do you think she is too hard on him?
- Should Mr. Stevens have done more on Specky's behalf, given that he had a good understanding of the circumstances? (p250)
- What do you think about Tim's behaviour?
- What do you think should happen next to Tim?
- What do you think should happen to Mr. Brennan?
- What do you think will happen to Specky?
- Write a letter to Garry and Felice suggesting what you think should happen in the next book?

Additional Resources

Novels

Fusillo, Archimede. *Bruises*, Penguin Group (Australia) 0143003070

Gleitzman, Morris. *Boy Overboard*, Penguin Group (Australia) 0141308389

Gwynne, Phillip. *The Worst Team Ever: Aussie Bites*, Penguin Group (Australia) 014130510X

Gwynne, Phillip. *Jetty Rats*, Penguin Group (Australia) 0143300490

See also a comprehensive listing under *Specky Magee and the Great Footy Contest*.

Films

A League of their Own

Swimming Upstream

Deadly Unna

Year of the Dogs

Felice Arena & Garry Lyon 