

Teachers' Notes
written by Roger Watts



Specky Magee & a Legend in the Making

by Felice Arena and Garry Lyon

Synopsis

Specky Magee & a Legend in the Making is the fifth book in the best selling series. It continues Specky's story after his disastrous dismissal from prestigious Gosmore Grammar. He has been rejected by many of his old footy friends and it's soon clear that his old rival Screamer Johnson is behind his problems.

Firstly, Specky discovers a mystery in Screamer's life and, secondly, an unlikely secret passion. How he will use this information becomes a test of Specky's character. As the day of a crucial state selection game approaches, Specky is forced to make some critical decisions that will affect his sport and his relationships.

Whilst Specky revises his decision not to play for Booyong High he has to learn again what it means to be part of a team. This is highlighted when the state selectors come to watch a school match. Playing in a new position and being isolated by his old mates, Specky falls right into Screamer's trap and has a catastrophic game. Fortunately the state selector is prepared to give Specky a second chance, but will he be able to take it?

The school debutante ball provides a social background to the events on the football field. Specky agrees to partner Tiger Girl, but his relationship with Christina deteriorates as Screamer's feud with Specky forces Christina to question her loyalties. Her doubts appear to be confirmed when she finds Specky in a compromising position with Tiger Girl, but the book shows that things are not always what they seem, and an unusual series of events lead to the book's unexpected conclusion.

Introduction

Many of the original characters; Screamer, Danny, Robbo, Tiger Girl and Christina, return in this book. The original setting, Booyong High, is used, and this has a more conventional format than the last, which was more of a mystery. There is a balance between sporting action and Specky's relationships. As Garry Lyon tells us in the introduction, "*What is important to one person is not necessarily important to another*" and this book explores

some unusual perspectives on people's behaviour. It is interesting to see that even the apparent "villains" are presented as real humans with their own set of problems, and this nice tolerant approach is a feature of the book. It provides a balance for the macho approach that is normally associated with football as several of the characters not only explore their passions in other more sensitive cultural pursuits, but they have to deal with grief as well. However the book's message is clearly expressed by Felice Arena, "...be the best you can be and go for it!"

The student activities suggested here are suitable for a junior secondary English or General Studies class, and can be read in conjunction with the teachers notes provided for the earlier books available. English teachers will find *Specky Magee & a Legend in the Making* 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. Text questions and a passage for closer study are offered, but most activities pick up on ideas in the text and encourage students to undertake further research in areas of interest to them.

Themes

Passion

In a sense this theme is explored through the character of Screamer. Whilst he has so far been depicted as the "villain", this really is only one side of his character. His relationship with his father, which has been an issue in several of the previous *Specky* books, is again brought into focus, and readers can see that Screamer's behaviour is partly a result of the internal conflict he faces over his love for football and his love for music, expressed through piano playing.

Specky has no such dilemma. "*I have only one true passion and that's footy,*" he says (p.192), and, whilst he often shows himself to be very talented in a number of ways, he does not face the problem of Screamer and a number of great sportsmen who have had "*to choose what they were most passionate about. They had to be true to themselves.*"

Appearances

Screamer has had to hide his talent, not only from his father, but his schoolmates as well, so that the side that appears to the world is the macho bully. Similarly, his father, who has appeared as a most intolerant and unforgiving character in this series so far, is revealed to be suffering the grief of losing his first son. That he has passed on his ambitions to his second son is not surprising; so to a certain extent the reader can learn to forgive some of his intolerance. Not completely, though. There is a great deal of satisfaction to be derived from hearing Grub, the state coach, give him a good dressing down, "*Your boy has got some ability, but you're his biggest obstacle, pal.*" (p.182) and seeing Mr. Johnson back down. That Mr. Johnson has finally learned something and can accept his son is made clear at the end when Screamer plays piano at the school assembly and "*...suddenly out of the blue, Mr. Johnson opened his arms and hugged Screamer tightly.*" (p.197)

Sporting events are played out against the backdrop of the school debutante ball and readers are given some amusing images of burly footballers attempting to dress and dance elegantly. The Great McCarthy has greatest apparent difficulty in this regard, and when he appears at the ball dressed in a Tiger's costume, Specky himself becomes the victim of a practical joke and is taught a lesson by Dieter and his sister: *"You always stir her.... well we caught you out big time, dude!"* (p.158)

More serious, though, is the way Specky's relationship with Christina is developed. What begins as a platonic friendship with Tiger Girl evolves during the course of the Debutante Ball preparations into a three-way comedy of errors. This is brought about through a series of false impressions, created in the mind of both Specky and his friends. This comes to a head at the after party when Christina catches Specky attempting to kiss Tiger Girl at the prompting of the Great McCarthy:

"Why did you have to go and kiss me? What were you thinking?"

"Um, I thought, that, um, "stuttered Specky. "I thought the surprise was that you were gonna kiss me." (p.164)

Grief

Much of the book is concerned with unravelling the mystery surrounding the Johnson family, not only Screamer's secret passion, but also what had happened to his brother Craig. The catalyst for this revelation is the funeral of Danny Castellino's grandmother. It is while Specky is at the funeral that he sees Craig's gravestone and starts to put two and two together. *"There were so many things about Screamer that no one knew."* (p.105)

It is interesting to see the way Specky handles Screamer's aggression: *"Since learning of Screamer's family secrets he couldn't help seeing his old rival in a different way."* Specky is forced to take a more proactive role in handling of the Johnson family dilemma.

Relationships

Specky's rivalry with Screamer puts great pressure on his relationship with Christine. She knows something of the family history, and this better understanding of Screamer divides her loyalties. Whilst she has attempted to use her knowledge to unsuccessfully intervene on Specky's behalf, she is not prepared to reveal Screamer's secrets. Since Screamer has used her intervention to taunt Specky, her apparent lack of honesty unsettles him and it is not surprising when the friendship ends. It will require the integrity and good intentions of Tiger Girl to resolve the situation, but not before a few misunderstandings further complicate the issue.

Friendship

Specky has to face a return to Booyong High where he has become isolated from his friends. This is largely the doing of Screamer Johnson, but it is an interesting exercise to compare the differing responses of Danny and Robbo with those of Johnny Cockatoo and Tiger Girl.

Tiger Girl in particular is an interesting character, for while the authors keep the love interest with Specky ticking over, she nevertheless consistently acts as a good friend. After Specky has attempted to kiss her she says: *"Speck, we're mates...you're like a brother to me. And even if I did like you that way, I wouldn't chase ya, 'cause I know how much Christina means to you."* (p.165)

Teamwork

When Specky arrives back at Booyong he soon finds that things are not as they were. He can no longer rely on his old friends, particularly Danny and Robbo. They have come under the influence of Screamer's malice and even though a truce of a kind is declared, when it comes to the football oval the old suspicions soon surface: *"The best part about being involved in a sport like football was feeling that you were part of team and right now Specky definitely felt like an outsider."* (p.40 – 41)

He is increasingly uncertain on the field, particularly as his mates refuse to pass the ball to him. As a consequence, Specky tries too hard to do his own thing, and he plays into Screamer's hands.

Of course the whole thing is complicated by the fact that the state selectors are there to watch the game. If Specky is really going to fulfil his promise as a footballer he will need to learn more about teamwork in future trial games for the selectors.

Masculinity

This book presents some interesting role models and illustrates them with actual examples from the footballing world. The sight of footballers crying is less uncommon nowadays, but Specky is overcome when he first returns to Booyong and, when Danny cries at his Grandmother's funeral, he involves the boys in an unusual emotional response. (p.101)

When Screamer goes off to play classical piano, this can be seen as no more unusual than the many AFL players who have other interests ranging from ballet to poetry writing: *"...it didn't mean that they couldn't also be talented in a whole different area of life."* (p.72)

Improvement

When Specky goes to train with the state squad, he meets Brian Edwards "a superstar" whose *"reputation had even made it to Melbourne"*. After a gruelling training session, he invites Specky to do some extra practice, and Specky is surprised to see that Brian has counted every kick and mark:

"Why did you keep score?" asked Specky, amazed that Brian could recall all of that.'

'Well, how am I going to know if I improve next time?'" (p.134)

See Teachers Notes for *Specky Magee and the Boots of Glory* for ways to use data to improve results.

Questions on the Text

Chapter 1

- What kind of a man is Mr. Johnson?
- How does his language reveal his character?
- What do we learn about Specky in this first chapter?
- What two mysteries about Screamer are introduced?

Chapter 2

- What problems does Specky face on his return to Booyong High?
- What is Theresa Fallon's nickname?
- What does this tell the reader about her?
- What is Dieter's problem?
- What does he want Specky to do?
- Why is Specky unable to talk with either Coach Pate or Tiger Girl?

Chapter 3

- How does Specky react to the pressure he is under at school?
- Describe Specky's relationship with his sister.
- Give two reasons why it is so important for Specky to play the first game for Booyong.

Chapter 4

- In what ways does it seem that Specky has been betrayed by his schoolmates?

Chapter 5

- Why does Specky think he should give up footy?
- What are Specky's reasons for and against taking part in the debutante ball?
- Why does Specky get upset with Christina?

Chapter 6

- Why, in the authors' opinions do people care so much about football?
- Do you agree?
- Do you agree that the "*Hangar Macpherson*" books are the best books ever?!
- How successful is Specky in avoiding football for a day?

Chapter 7

- How do Dieter and Specky differ in their efforts at ballroom dancing?
- How does Specky feel about his dancing class and how does this affect his relationship with Christina?

Chapter 8

- When Mr. Magee and Mr. Johnson are arguing, why does Specky suddenly protect Screamer?
- What does this reveal about Specky's character?

- What kind of change does this bring about in Screamer?

Chapter 9

- Is Specky unrealistic in expecting his mates to apologize?
- What is most important to the state selectors?

Chapter 10

- Explain how Specky, Danny and Robbo are reunited.

Chapter 11

- Explain why Specky and Christina are unable to talk to one another.

Chapter 12

- How was Specky able to impress the state selectors?

Chapter 13

- What does Specky learn from training with the state team and Brian Edwards?

Chapter 14

- What is Specky's "*perfect idea*"? (p.139)

Chapter 15

- Why are Mr and Mrs Johnson arguing?
- Do you agree with Mr Johnson that "*this has nothing to do with Craig*" (p.140)?

Chapter 16

- How do the writers build up tension for the Debutante Ball?

Chapter 17

- "*Specky couldn't believe it – talk about feeling like a complete loser.*" (p.164) Why should Specky feel so bad?

Chapter 18

- How does this scene change the relationship between Specky and Screamer?

Chapter 19

- What evidence is there that Specky has learned from his training with the state squad?

Chapter 20

- How does Screamer change during the school assembly?

Chapter 21

- Specky is described as an "*unsung hero*" (p. 201). Would you agree?

Passage for closer Study

Read pp. 168 – 173

Answer the following Questions

- Why does Specky feel guilty to call himself one of Screamer's friends?
- What do you think Mr. Li means when he says, "...very talented people sometimes have to make very difficult choices."
- Is he talking about Screamer in particular, or does what he says apply to other people as well?
- Why might it be necessary for talented people to make a choice?
- Why is Specky taking the risk to talk to Screamer just now - find at least two reasons?
- How does Screamer's behaviour change when Specky tells him about Craig?
- "In all the time he had known Screamer he had never understood why he was the way he was until this very moment." What has Specky just learned?
- Does this make you feel more sympathetic towards Screamer? Why?

Instructional Writing

Shall we Dance?

In the old days couples used to dance holding on to one another. Nowadays this is much rarer, although with the popularity of *Dancing with the Stars*, who knows!

Find out about some of the original dance steps. Choose from one of the following : Waltz, Tango, Foxtrot, Latin, or if this is too traditional for you try something modern like Hip Hop or Break dancing.

Prepare a set of written instructions to explain the movements.

How to...?

Boys can't dance? Don't let this be a barrier to meeting people and having a good time.

Prepare a guide for young people on one of the following topics:

- How to fake it on the dance floor.
- How to ask a girl or boy to dance.
- How to ask a girl or boy on a date.
- How to end a relationship painlessly.

The Internet is full of (sometimes useless) information, but it's easy to research these topics if you're stuck for ideas, and you don't have to take this too seriously!

Argumentative Writing

Prepare a debate on the topic of debutante balls. Do they have a place in today's society?

Read the following newspaper extract from the Richmond Times Dispatch, December 16, 1934.

"The number of buds this year far exceeds that of last season and the preceding one. Despite the fact that today "coming out" is merely a side issue in the lives of many young women, the debutantes have become more plentiful than ever during the last few years. That making a debut is not as serious a business as it once was may be disputed but the fact has been proven that debutantes are combining social activities with other things. Some are continuing their college education or have taken regular positions or part-time jobs. Others rely on charity work or individual projects and hobbies to fill their spare time. Be this as it may, it is the supposed ambition of almost every mother that her daughter may lead the Richmond german.



Ranking in distinction with the St. Cecelia Ball in Charleston and the Bachelors' Cotillion at Baltimore, the german is received as the most social organization in the city. Members of the german cling to the accepted order of a dress suit and only once since its beginning has there been exception to this tradition. In this case, the party was corrected in no unmeasured terms. When prohibition was introduced, the customary "cup that cheers" was stored away and during those "17 years in the desert," again only once was a member severely censored for "dancing under the influence of too much drink." Recently it has become customary for Richmond fashionables to entertain with a cocktail party at their homes, preceding the german affairs. However, the motion to serve wine with the dinner was declined by the members this year."

*a 'german' is an old fashioned word for the debutante ball

<http://richmondthenandnow.com/Newspaper-Articles/Richmond-Germans.html>

- What is meant by the phrase "coming out"?
- The article suggests that debutantes are now "combining social activities with other things". What kind of things are debutantes doing in 1934?
- What does this suggest happened before 1934?
- What according to this article is the ambition of every mother?
- What is "the prohibition"?
- How did it affect the debutante ball?
- How have things changed since 1934?

Be a gossip columnist

- Oscar Wilde said: *“the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about”*.
- Gossip has always been a feature of the media, but now it seems to be even more popular, and newspapers and magazines have become very interested in the doings of successful and prominent people.

When Specky arrives back at Booyong High, he is the subject of a series of newspaper articles written by Theresa Fallon. Most of these are less than complimentary. Read the articles on pp. 9,122, and 201 .

- What is distinctive about this style of writing?
- Find similar articles in newspapers or magazines.
- What kinds of people appear in these articles?
- What sorts of things are said about them?
- Does this kind of writing serve a purpose or is it malicious?
- Imagine that you are a journalist and write an opinion piece about something that is happening in your school.
- Visit the Herald Sun, or The Age websites to see how columnists write.

What are you good at?

Prepare a talk about something that you are an expert on. It could be anything from playing piano, to collecting cards, or keeping tropical fish.

Think about your audience which could be a small group or the whole class and plan your presentation so that you are giving it new information.

Male Stereotypes

A 1999 survey found that the media presents males in the following way:

- on television, most men and boys usually keep their attention focused mostly just on women and girls
- many males on TV are violent and angry
- men are generally leaders and problem-solvers
- males are funny, confident, successful and athletic
- it's rare to see men or boys crying or otherwise showing vulnerability
- male characters on TV could not be described as "sensitive"
- male characters are mostly shown in the workplace, and only rarely at home
- male characters rarely perform household chores

http://www.mediaawareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/men_and_masculinity/masculinity_children.cfm

- How accurate do you think these conclusions are?
- Plan and conduct your own survey of a series of television shows to find out how men are presented, or you could design a similar survey to see how women are presented.

**Felice Arena &
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