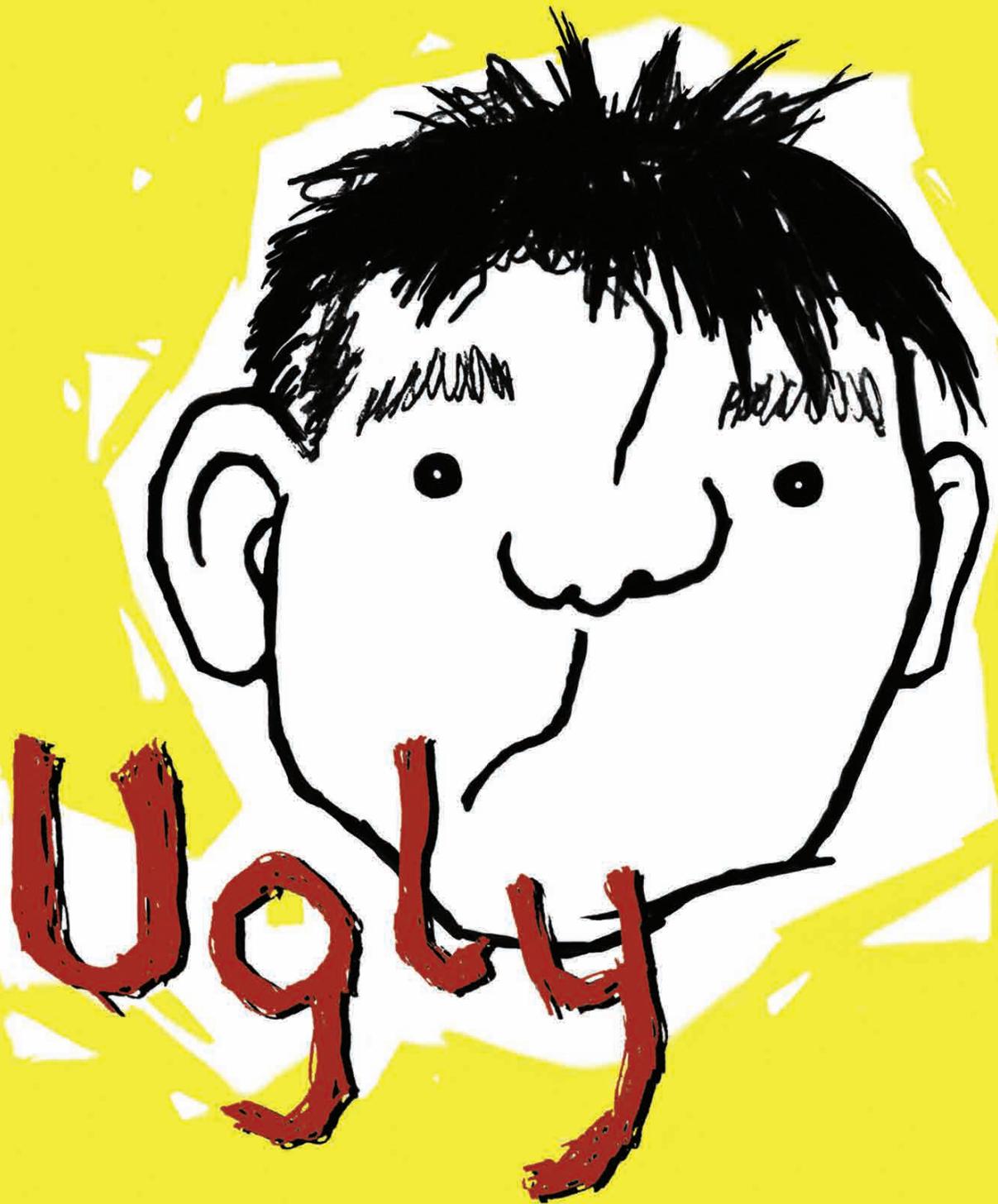


TEACHERS' NOTES BY ROBYN SHEAHAN-BRIGHT



By Robert Hoge

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# Ugly by Robert Hoge

Teachers' Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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## INTRODUCTION

'I knew I was ugly. But everyone is uglier than they think. We are all more beautiful too. We all have scars only we can own.' (p 182)

This memoir opens with a masterful piece of writing in which 'young Robert' crafts a baby's face from clay in an imagined primary school art class. His 'masterpiece' is destroyed when his arch rival attacks the lump of clay and makes it ugly. This provides the segue into the heart of the story: Robert's entry into the world and how he made his way through his childhood and young adult years to become the adult he is. These sequences continue throughout the narrative as the 'masterpiece' revisits his life, as it has been 'made', to each successive date.

This is at times a painfully honest account of a family's adjustment to having a baby with disabilities. Born the fifth child in working-class Wynnum in Brisbane, Robert had a severe facial tumour and two damaged shortened legs. Robert's mother, Mary, was at first unable to even look at her baby, let alone agree to take him home, knowing the struggles he might have for acceptance, and her own difficulties in accepting him. And, yet, Robert was not only perfectly healthy in terms of his inner organs, but also a very intelligent, alert and resilient child.

'Each one had something different about them. I just had different differences.' (p 49)

The family eventually made a unilateral decision to 'keep' him. His childhood was marred by successive operations, and inevitably by the challenges attached to being 'different'. But it was also enabled by the fiercely protective love showered on him by his father, Vincent, by his mother, and by his siblings. He endured bullying and self-doubt, made friends, and also developed skills based on a keen intelligence. His rejection of further surgery in his teens, was founded on a mature decision to take 'ownership' of his face and not to take the risk of losing his eyesight, contracting brain damage or even losing his life.

This is an inspiring story, and one which determinedly invites the reader to feel empathy rather than sympathy for the narrator. Robert Hoge's story is certainly about being different, but his message is about being contented and even thankful for that fact. He has made of his disability a reason to do better at what he is best at, and to learn things he might not have, had he not had a disability.

Robert Hoge's story is not ugly but, rather, a thing of beauty.

## BEFORE & AFTER READING THE MEMOIR

- Examine the **cover** of the novel. What does it suggest about the memoir's themes?
- After you have read the memoir, examine the cover again: what does it suggest to you now?
- After you have read the memoir, read about Robert Hoge in articles (See **Bibliography**) and use the notes below to examine the text more closely.

## THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes relevant to curriculum topics (Studies of Society and Environment, Science, and English Language and Literacy) might be identified in this memoir:

### STUDIES OF SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT (SOSE)

- **Beauty Versus Ugly**

*Discussion Point:* ‘Right then and there I decided that what my words meant and said were more important than how they looked. I decided I’d always choose writing faster over writing neat. I’d sacrifice legibility on the altar of speed. Looks didn’t matter so much.’ (p 105) Robert is speaking about handwriting here, but this quote applies to the whole question of which is more important – what you look like or who you are?

*Discussion Point:* What is beauty? What does the word ‘ugly’ mean?

*Discussion Point:* How much are our opinions of others and of ourselves invested in how we look, in contemporary society? (Consider, for example, the enormous amount of money spent on plastic surgery, Botox and other elective surgical procedures.)

*Discussion Point:* Consider how different societies have such varied notions of beauty.

[See **Bibliography** for resources.]

- **Treatment of Disability**

*Discussion Point:* Mary Hoge’s local GP advised her to put Robert in a home without having seen him. His attitude was that with four other children to care for, she didn’t owe him her care. How prevalent was this sort of thinking in the 1970s? Have attitudes changed today?

*Discussion Point:* The turning point for the Hoge family was their decision to ask the older siblings whether they should bring Robert home, and their universal agreement. “You were a baby and it was just the way you were.” Mum started to understand that she had been focusing on what other people might think of her new baby. “My worry and my concern were more a matter of pride than anything else,” Mum said. She started thinking about how she might have reacted if my problems were on the inside rather than the outside.’ (pp 12–13) Are young children more accepting of difference? What changes their attitudes as they reach school age and teen years?

*Discussion Point:* ‘Mum had no intention of sending me to a school for the disabled, even though she was constantly asked if that’s where I was headed.’ (p 39–40) ‘Mainstreaming’ is now the official term for children with disabilities being integrated into classrooms. Robert was educated at Guardian Angels School at Wynnun, and later Iona College. After the strictness of nuns and Mr French, he found an inspiring teacher in Gary Bolton (p 105),

who encouraged his creativity. But he received a rude shock when he was sent as a work experience student to a school, and was reprimanded by a principal for not ‘warning’ the school of his disability (pp 170–71). Is the educational landscape more open to integration today? Or are there still inherent prejudices in the way in which disabled children are treated in the system? Invite students to consider their own experiences.

*Discussion Point:* ‘There are some things I just couldn’t avoid when it came to my disability ... on my own’ (pp 77–78) Read this two-page passage. Discuss the three things which Robert took from his disability and how he used them in his life.

*Discussion Point:* Robert’s acceptance as a member of a lawn bowls team, with the assistance of mentor Frank Plant (p 143), was a milestone. ‘I’d wanted so desperately to be part of a team. I’d wanted to be cheered when I got something right and jeered when I didn’t. I wanted to win, and when I didn’t I wanted to lose with friends by my side. Lawn bowls gave me all that and more.’ (p 161) How difficult is it for disabled children to be accepted as members of ordinary school ‘teams’? What hurdles are they likely to confront in order to participate?

- **Self Esteem, Peer Group Pressure and Bullying**

*Discussion Point:* ‘At first I didn’t notice being treated any differently by the other kids, but it didn’t take long ... Some kids didn’t seem to care how I looked, but for every kid who didn’t care, there were ten who did.’ (pp 46–47) How damaging are the opinions of others to a child’s self-esteem?

*Discussion Point:* Bullying is common in any school, unfortunately, and Robert’s differences made him a prime target. ‘It’s not far from the first gentle wave of genuine interest and curiosity to a crashing tide of teasing and meanness.’ (p 59) ‘I never came out and told them about being teased at school. They had enough to deal with. And more than that – being teased made me feel somehow weak, useless. As if it was my fault. As if I deserved it. As if I hadn’t been brave enough to fight it.’ (p 62) Is this a common response to bullying? How should schools and parents identify and deal with such treatment?

*Discussion Point:* Name calling (pp 114–121) is a powerful form of bullying. Discuss with students the use of nicknames and how they can be negative, even when used with no deliberately malicious intent. Discuss the list which Robert puts together here, which offers a succinct analysis of the power of names and their impact.

- **Rite of Passage and Survival Tactics**

*Discussion Point:* One of the messages in this memoir is that one can be either a ‘glass-half-full’ or ‘glass-half-empty’ type of person when confronted with life’s challenges. Robert writes after his second foot is removed: ‘I was fast in a way I never had been before’ (p 38) OR ‘In time, swimming would become a physical freedom greater than I could ever have imagined.’ (p 64) This is one of many examples of how he made advantages out of his challenges.

*Discussion Point:* ‘I don’t mind what I do or where I am, as long as I’m playing and as long as I’m there.’ (p 95) Robert’s inability to play football is turned into a positive by his parents’ skilful compromise. How much of his optimism stemmed from their attitudes as well?

*Discussion Point:* Robert does handstands at the school camp and wins the prize for his cabin (Ch 16, pp 124–133). This was a risky act of self-revelation and is a supreme example of his ‘can-do’ attitude to life. What other examples of his upbeat nature and optimism did you notice in the narrative?

*Discussion Point:* ‘I was starting to realise that while kids laughing at you could be very hurtful, kids laughing at something you’d done was a different thing entirely.’ (p 88) Robert’s innate sense of humour offered another strategy with which to overcome his challenges.

*Discussion Point:* At the end of the memoir, Robert decides ‘to take ownership over my face’ (p 181). Ownership is a fundamental concept in growing up. Each life includes challenges which are particular to that person and which require individual strategies for coping. Too often, parents strive to ‘protect’ children who are then not given the room to develop their own strengths. Robert’s parents protected him from injuries (e.g. from football) but also gave him the dignity of making his own choices, most notably in his decision not to proceed with further surgery.

- **Love and Friendship**

*Discussion Point:* ‘It might have taken her a week to come and see me for the first time and another month before she decided to bring me home, but when she did, Mum’s love for me grew fast and fierce.’ (p 16) How much did his family’s love bolster Robert’s resolve to be strong and independent?

*Discussion Point:* Robert’s friends are given credit, too, for his development, e.g. David (p 44); Robert Firmin and Robert Webb (p 72); Cassandra (p 73). Discuss the scenes in which his friends appear, and what they reveal about the support he gained from them.

## **SCIENCE**

- **Medical Science**

*Discussion Point:* ‘It was major surgery: a type of operation hardly ever performed anywhere else in the world, let alone Australia.’ (p 26) The army of doctors (p 18) who treated Robert conducted a series of operations, including amputating his deformed feet. But nothing was riskier than the operations on his face: ‘Being put under general anaesthetic for so long presents a risk of brain damage. Next up was the chance of infection, which is especially high when bone is being cut and moved around. Any operation on the face also means lots of bleeding. Combined, the risks meant the operation could kill me.’ (p 26) Research cranio-facial operations and what they entail.

*Discussion Point:* Dr Leigh Atkinson and Dr Tony Emmett's cranio-facial operations on Robert gave him a better chance of leading a normal life. But he later opted not to proceed with more surgery. Discuss his reasons, and the outcomes for his future.

*Discussion Point:* 'Mum explained that it was because of some medicine she was taking when I was in her tummy, before she knew she was going to have another baby.' (p 63) His deformities were later discovered to have been caused by his mother's medication during pregnancy. How common is this sort of medical accident, e.g. the birth defects caused by Thalidomide in the early 1960s? <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thalidomide>>

*Discussion Point:* Pain and its management is a topic referred to often, but not in detail, except for the dreadful description of the splint removal (pp 140–41). How much of Robert's life must have been plagued by pain? What impression does he give of its effects? And how did he deal with it?

*Discussion Point:* Robert's story tends to focus on his facial surgery, but the operations to amputate his deformed legs, and his ability to walk on two prosthetic legs, are further medical miracles.

*Discussion Point:* 'I might never be a pretty sculpture but I was done with being the doctors' clay.' (p 181) Robert makes it clear that each operation has also created risks to his health, actual damage (to his eye) and infection. Discuss the choices given to patients by surgeons and how much difficulty one might have in resisting 'expert' advice to proceed with surgery.

[Any of the topics above might be researched online, so only two sample references have been included in the **Bibliography**.]

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERACY

Study the writing style employed in this narrative, and examine the following sub-topics:

- **Memoirs** rely for their impact on the writer's unique style as much as on an interesting and original story. The story is told from Robert's **first person subjective narrative point of view**. It might be studied in terms of a range of aspects of style. Robert Hoge's training as a journalist and writer enhances the narrative in his very succinct and highly effective way of describing the milestones in his story with the use of expressions such as: 'Those dice were about to be rolled.' (p 28) OR 'Beached at the beach.' (p 64) OR 'Chemical warfare in the schoolyard was frowned upon. The game was over.' (p 164) Chapter titles are also cryptically effective: 'Chapter 5 The Big Fix' (p 29) OR 'Chapter 9 Names People Play' (p 58).

*Discussion Point:* Identify other aspects of the style, or passages which were particularly engaging.

- **Literary Devices** such as simile, metaphor and personification are used.  
For example:

<b>Simile</b>	‘like superhero Avengers’ (p 31) ‘As soon as I let go, I’d feel my hips start to wobble and then I’d fall over – like a stack of books piled too high.’ (p 39)
<b>Metaphor</b>	‘If our house was a dog it would be a rough little mongrel of a thing – not big, not fancy, not pretty. Luckily it was a happy mutt most of the time.’ (p 14) ‘And me, the Hulk.’ (p 32)
<b>Personification</b>	‘The kidneys are the football referees of the body.’ (p 34) ‘My primary school was the tiniest of midgets, compared to the giant that was Iona.’ (p 113)

*Activity:* Find other examples of the use of these devices in this memoir.

*Activity:* The description of Iona College: ‘Even ... side.’ (p 113) is crafted from carefully selected descriptive words and phrases. Analyse the use of language in this passage and how it achieves its effects.

- **Humour** is another aspect of the narrative which makes it highly engaging and readable.

*Activity:* Identify **techniques** by which humour is provoked.

<b>Sarcasm</b>	“Probably not,” she said. “But she may want to have a look at your bedroom, so you’d better go and clean it up.” (p 40) ‘It was as compulsory as soggy tomato sandwiches at little lunch.’ (p 82) “I have good news,” he said. Maybe we were going to watch a movie without talking dogs tomorrow night, I thought.’ (p 128)
<b>Irony</b>	‘Sometimes I’d get asked: “How did you lose your legs?” As if I’d left them on the bus and they were waiting to be reclaimed from lost property.’ (pp 76–77)
<b>Exaggeration</b>	‘I wanted to ride a bike so much, I thought I’d burst into flames if I didn’t.’ (p 50)
<b>Bathos</b>	“Put that leg on,” she said, “and get up.” Then she turned to Mum, looking horrified. “This has never happened in my classroom before,” she said.’ (p 87)
<b>Black Humour</b>	“Terrible how they let kids so young play football these days,” she said to her friend. “Look at the damage it does.” (p 101)

*Activity:* Identify incidents which are humorous, e.g. learning to ride a bike (pp 50–53); selling grapefruit (pp 74–75); Skylab fantasy (pp 79–81); his huge file at the Mater Hospital (p 135).

- The **Setting** of the story can be analysed in terms of the key narrative features used to engage the reader's attention.

a) *Strong beginnings and endings to chapters* are one way of structuring a narrative, for example:

Beginning: 'I emerged from the operation a very different little boy.' (Ch 6, p 34)

Ending: 'It was worse.' (Ch 13, p 112)

b) *Chronological Structure* provides a focus and a logical order to the reading.

c) *Using a 'framing story'* makes a narrative more cohesive, i.e. the set piece with which it begins (in which a baby's face is being molded from clay) is used as a point of reference throughout the narrative.

d) *Suspense* is also created to enhance reader engagement, for example, in incidents such as when Robert was stuck in the mud (pp 89–92), which could have ended disastrously but ended humorously. *Question:* What other moments were particularly suspenseful in this memoir?

*Activity:* Draw up a list of these and other key strategies used in this novel's narrative structure.

- **Setting** is vividly and warmly conveyed.

*Discussion Point:* What does the bayside setting of Wynnum in Brisbane convey to the reader about the type of family the Hoges are?

- **Characters include Major characters** (Robert; Mary, his mother; Vincent, his father; his siblings, Gary, Michael, Paula and Catherine) and **Minor characters** (his friends, teachers, and doctors).

*Activity:* Draw up a character chart and find key quotes which give a clear picture of the natures of any of these characters, and isolate events which demonstrate their natures. Then write a brief character study of the person using the quotes and events to illustrate the points made in your summary.

*Question:* Which character was most intriguing and why? Which character would you like to have heard more about?

- **Visual Literacy**

*Activity:* Create a graphic novel interpretation of an incident in the novel.  
(See **Bibliography** for resources.)

*Activity:* Design a cover for this book using only typography, colour and a silhouetted figure.

*Activity:* Create a book trailer for this memoir. (See **Bibliography** for resources.)

## FURTHER QUOTES FOR DISCUSSION

Read the following quotes and discuss them:

1. 'Humans are like social Lego. We connect together with families. We build lives with friends. On our own, we're just one piece. When we come together in groups we make amazing things. Our admission ticket into these groups is not our thoughts or our feelings. Our faces are our tickets. Our faces let us look out and know others and let them know us.' (p 24)
2. 'Mum told Dad that if he said no, she would consider leaving him and taking me with her so the decision would be all hers. She had gone from being a new mother who did not want to see her baby, let alone bring him home, to someone who would put everything on the line for his future.' (p 27)
3. 'I decided to protect Mum from the truth.' (p 62)
4. 'The kid with a squishy nose and strange legs isn't that surprising when you're three years old and you hear stories about talking bears sitting at a table eating porridge. It's only as kids get older that they start to know what's normal and what's not.' (pp 75–76)
5. 'Acknowledging someone's differences can be about saying you're not scared to talk to someone about the things that make them, them.' (p 102)
6. 'I liked to watch sport – but couldn't really play it. I enjoyed listening to music – but I couldn't play an instrument. It didn't seem like there was any way to define myself other than by what was missing – my legs – and the strange extras I had – a nose made out of a toe.' (p 122)
7. 'Every time I looked in the mirror I was reminded not only of just how far from normal I was but how little ownership I had of my face.' (p 137)
8. 'Once again, my disability had restricted my choices but then driven me to new ones that seemed so much better than anything else could have been.' (p 159)
9. 'I'd expect that you more than most boys would know how hurtful teasing can be.' (p 168)
10. "“The doctors are really keen for the operation to go ahead,” Dad said. “But like I said, it's your choice.”” (p 176)
11. 'What use is looking pretty, if he can't even see himself?' (p 181)
12. 'There was just as much chance I had become who I was because of my ugliness and my disability.' (p 182)

## FURTHER ACTIVITIES

1. Compare the memoir to other fiction and non-fiction texts which deal with facial deformity or other disabilities. (See **Bibliography** for resources.)
2. Design a poster to advertise this book.
3. The **title of this book** is deliberately cryptic and provocative, inviting readers to question notions of beauty and ugliness. What other title might it have had?
4. Write an acrostic poem using the letters in UGLY. (See **Bibliography**.)
5. Debate any of the topics covered in these notes, or suggested by the memoir.

## CONCLUSION

This memoir is not about a triumph over adversity but, rather, an affirmation of life. It is a moving and often very entertaining tale of a young man's journey through his early life and the milestones he achieved along that way. It culminates in his entry to young adulthood with the triumphant statement:

'It was me, my legs and my ugly face against the world.' (p 182)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Hoge has done pretty much every kind of writing there is. He has worked as a journalist, a speechwriter, a science writer and a political advisor. He's also written numerous short stories, articles and interviews that have been published in Australia and overseas. When he's not writing, Robert enjoys photography and talking with people about looking different and being disabled. He lives in Brisbane and is married, and has two amazing daughters.

For more information visit his website at:  
<http://www.roberthoge.com>



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## Teachers' Resources on Book Trailers & Writing

### **Non-Fiction:**

- Chinn, Mike, *Writing and Illustrating the Graphic Novel: everything you need to know to Create Great Graphic Works*, London, New Burlington Books, 2004, 2006.
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- 'Book Trailers – Resources: Ipswich District Teacher Librarian Network' <<http://learningplace.com.au/deliver/content.asp?pid=41987>>
- 'Book Trailers' *Insideadog* <<http://www.insideadog.com.au/teachers/book-trailers>> 'Book Trailers for Readers' by Michelle Harclerode <<http://www.booktrailersforreaders>>
- 'What is an Acrostic Poem?' *Young Writers* < <https://www.youngwriters.co.uk/types-acrostic>>

## Website Resources

### **Teachers' Resources on Bullying:**

- Bullying. No Way! <<http://www.kidshelp.com.au/growups/news-research/teacher-resources/bullying-lesson-resources.php>>
- '11 Facts About Bullying' DoSomething.Org <<http://www.dosomething.org/tipsandtools/11-facts-about-cyber-bullying>>
- 'Facts and Figures about Bullying' <<http://www.kidspot.com.au/schoolzone/Bullying-Facts-and-figures-about-bullying+4065+395+article.htm>>
- Safe Schools Hub <<http://safeschoolshub.edu.au/>>

### **Teachers' Resources on Medical Treatment of Facial Deformities:**

- Craniofacial Australia <<http://www.craniofacial.com.au/>>
- Craniofacial Surgery <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Craniofacial\\_surgery](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Craniofacial_surgery)>
- Little Baby Face Foundation <<http://www.littlebabyface.org/>>
- Operation Smile Australia <<http://australia.operationssmile.org/>>

There are also many sites which include interviews with parents of children who have facial deformities.

### Teachers' Resources on Notions of Beauty:

- Geography of Beauty <<http://geography.about.com/od/culturalgeography/a/Geography-Of-Beauty.htm>>
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<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kp7AoG9inA>>
- 'In Your Face' 16/09/2013 *Australian Story* <[http://www.abc.net.au/austory/specials/inyourface/default.htm#watch\\_australian\\_story](http://www.abc.net.au/austory/specials/inyourface/default.htm#watch_australian_story)>

## 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. She also teaches writing for children and young adults at Griffith University (Gold Coast) where she gained her PhD for a thesis on the development of the Australian children's publishing industry. Her publications include *Paper Empires a History of the Book in Australia 1946–2005* (co-edited with Craig Munro) (UQP, 2006). In 2011 she was Recipient of the CBCA (Qld) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award, in 2012 she was recipient of the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature, and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award.