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SWAN SONG TEACHERS' GUIDE

Swan Song Colin Thiele

Swan Song is yet another beautiful and moving story from master story-teller Colin Thiele. It has the ingredients children love and look forward to in his novels – adventure and human interest. The story is set within a natural environment, and this and other subjects that concern and interest young people are dealt with in a very real yet thought-provoking manner.

Mitch is the son of a National Parks' Ranger. The family is based in the Coorong and Mitch loves where he lives and is able to enjoy and explore his environs. One day he and his father go to Pelican Island to check on things there. They find that something has happened to disturb the birds and many nests have been abandoned. There is one nest, however, that has two newly hatched pelicans. Mitch persuades his father, against the Ranger's better judgment, to let him take the birds to try to save them. Later Mitch brings back a swan egg, and against all odds, succeeds in hatching it and rearing the cygnet.

The story is concerned with Mitch's life and the changes and options he faces, and the wonderful relationship that develops between the boy and his birds.

Swan Song provides the reader with rich sources of language, ideas and information.

Setting

- Where is the story set?

Opening

As an exercise, it is invaluable to realise what an accomplished author does to keep readers interested in a story.

- Read the opening chapter and then jot down what you have learned by the end of it.
- How does the reader find out what is happening?

Characters

Mitch is the main character in *Swan Song*, and the reader learns a great deal about him as a person, his way of life and his values and beliefs.

- Do a pen portrait of Mitch saying as much as you can about him as a person. Include where he lives, what he is like, what his circumstances are, what he enjoys doing and how he spends his time - both during the week and on the weekend. Mention his family life and anything else you know about him.
- Do a pen sketch of Mitch's mother and father, saying what each is like and how Mitch gets on with them.
- List all the other characters in *Swan Song* and briefly state what part they play in the story.

In many ways the three 'responsibilities' that Mitch has are well-developed enough to be characters in the story.

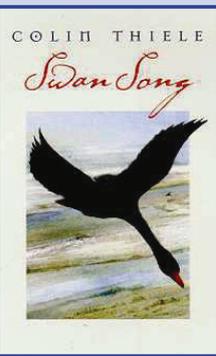
- Write what you can about them, giving a description of each and mentioning what they are like as they grow up and what they do. Also mention any special features they have.

Language and Literacy

- Make a list of the rules that were established for Mitch's expeditions by himself.
- Was Mitch's father's advice helpful?

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- What things did Mitch find on the beach? Where did they come from?
- What does 'yahoo' mean? Where did the word originate? List other terms used in the story that mean the same thing.
- *A day out with (his father) was a sort of lesson* (page 20). What was to be learned?
- What happened that ...*changed Mitch's life forever?* (Page 31)
- How did the two pelicans get their names?
- How did Mitch name the new-born cygnet?
- What is the dilemma that Mitch faces on page 57? What does he decide to do?
- What is meant by: *He decided there was something wrong with the stars in his horoscope that day ...* on page 65?
- What is the significance of: *Shake on it* on page 70?
- What is a white lie? (See page 71)
- What is a vendetta? (See page 79)
- Explain why Mitch's father didn't accept the offer of the mulloway from Whiskers Burns. (See pages 87-88).
- What is meant by *rippling in the mirage* on page 106?
- What does his father mean when he says: *It shows how dangerous it is to jump to conclusions, Mitch* on page 131?

Slowly he began to see that his predicament was much worse than he had thought. (Page 141).

- Outline what Mitch's predicament was.
- How was Mitch rescued?

No-one ever knew what caused the terrible catastrophe in the next few seconds. (Page 166)

- Explain what the terrible tragedy was. (Page 168)

The reader learns a lot about how people feel in *Swan Song*. On page 87 Mitch was *terrified*. On page 89 *Mitch was shocked* and on page 90 *Mitch felt guilty*. On page 110 *he was thunderstruck*, and, on page 161, we learn that *Mitch was happy*.

- Find other places in the story where we are told about people's feelings and outline the circumstances of the emotion.
- What is the name for a male swan? What is the name for a female swan?
- Make a list of the water birds that are mentioned in *Swan Song*.

Vocabulary

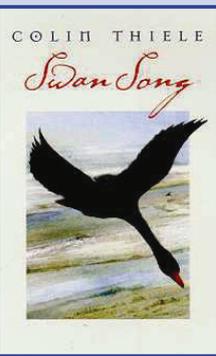
Colin Thiele's use of language is to be emulated. Make a study of the following words and phrases and look at them in context to ascertain their meaning:

- *incredibly apt* (page 8); *rucked up* (page 10)
- What are *barrages*? (Page 30)
- What is the meaning of *sceptical* (page 42), *quandary* (page 46), *carousing* (page 56), *laconic* (page 80), *brusquely* (page 159), *distraught* (page 177).

Compile a list of unusual expressions and words you did not know the meaning of.

Imagery

Colin Thiele uses many graphic images to portray a word picture to the reader. Examine the following in detail and find further instances. Use similes and metaphors in your own writing to make it more vivid.



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- like a huge mirrorthe mirror turned into ripple glass... (page 10)
- crawling like a lizard (page 56)
- as hungry as hunters (page 82)
- Jot down any images that particularly appealed to you as you read.

Alliteration

...snackering sound on page 64 is an example of alliteration.

- What is alliteration? What is its purpose?

Sayings

- What is meant by the following:
...you'll kill him with kindness (page 39)?
- What does Mitch's father mean when he says: *They're going to be an albatross around your neck for the rest of your life* (page 42)? Was he correct? Where does this expression come from?
- *Eureka.* (page 52) What is meant by this expression? Where does it come from?
- What is meant by: *Nose to the grindstone...* on page 157?

Nicknames

- List all the characters in the story that have a nickname. Look at how such names came about.
- What is the purpose of nicknames? Do you use them?

Title

- How does the book get its name?
- What is a 'swan song'? Do we use the term to mean anything else?

Ending

What happens at the end of *Swan Song*? Make some comments and observations about how the story finished.

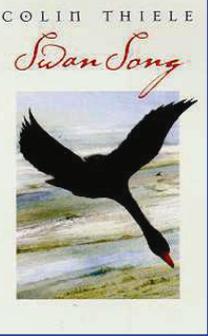
The Craft of Writing

There are many things to learn about the craft of the story-teller from *Swan Song*.

- How does Colin Thiele deal with the passage of time?
- Look at the way in which he paces his story.
- How does he keep the reader interested and involved in his story?
- Make a story map of *Swan Song*.

Discuss

tourism and tourists	grudges	revenge (see page 159)
making decisions	maturing	change
choices	rules	thinking
being independent	being responsible	vandalism



Find out more about

- Distance Education
- The Coorong National Park
- Pelicans
- Swans
- The migratory patterns of birds

Write about

- Nothing is black or white; everything is a shade of grey between the two.
- Put yourself in Mitch's place. Relate the conversation you had at the tea table after the incident with the dune buggies on page 18.
- Outline what it would be like to do schooling by Distance Education.
- As Mitch did, do a research project on a topic of your own choice, based on something that interested you from the novel *Swan Song*.
- Do you agree with Mitch's father when he says: *Surely you know by now that you shouldn't interfere with wildlife?* Base your answer on *Swan Song* to answer this question.
- Explain *that was the beginning of their great friendship* on page 84. Write about Mitch's 'best friend'.
- Describe Mitch's expeditions with his three 'responsibilities'
- Write a paragraph about the life and changes in the Cooyong that you learned about from reading Colin Thiele's novel.

In *Swan Song* the reader learns that sometimes there is 'trouble'.

- Find an example from the story and write about it in your own words.

Read other stories by Colin Thiele.

Read *Snow Goose*, referred to in *Swan Song*.

About the Author

Australia's most distinguished writer for children, Colin Thiele, AC, has been writing books for children for over forty years. Last year he celebrated his eightieth birthday. His books, including the multi-award-winning *Storm Boy*, *The Sun on the Stubble* and *Blue Fin*, have won numerous Australian and international awards and have been made into many classic films, TV series, plays and picture books. Lothian has published his titles *Jodie's Journey*, *Timmy*, *Landslide*, *Wendy's Whale* and *The Sea Caves* in Takeaways. *Pannikin and Pinta*, his recent picture story book illustrated by Peter Gouldthorpe, is currently shortlisted for the CBCA awards in the Younger Readers category. Born and raised in the Barossa Valley, Colin now lives near Dayboro, Queensland.

Notes written by Nancy Mortimer

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