

Teacher notes, *First Person Shooter*

About the book

First Person Shooter is a gritty coming-of-age story with the suspense of a thriller, set on the edge of an Australian country town. Jayden, the fifteen-year narrator, stutters and plays first person shooter games to take his mind off the bullies at school. His best friend, Shannon, lives nearby on a 90-acre farm. She knows how to shoot a rifle, as does Jayden.

When the novel opens, Shannon's mum, Madeleine, is soon to be released from prison, where she's been serving a 5½ year sentence for killing Shannon's abusive stepfather. Pete, the son of the man Madeleine shot, has returned to town for her homecoming, intent on revenge.

As a drug war erupts between the local bikies and Pete, and Madeleine's homecoming looms, Jayden is suspended from school. Drawn into the conflict, Jayden takes matters into his own hands, precipitating a showdown with Pete that will see Shannon's life threatened and the virtual world of violent gaming collide with the violence of small town life.

Will it be left to Jayden to save the girl he loves from the town psychopath?

About the author

Cameron Raynes lives in Semaphore, a coastal suburb of Adelaide. He read voraciously as a child and always dreamed of being a writer. At university he dropped out of chemical engineering to study literature, anthropology and philosophy. His first job on graduating was as welfare worker in a small gold-mining town 800 kilometres north of Perth. The experiences he had there have influenced much of his writing.

Since then he's worked as a barman, anthropologist, historian, editor, archivist, and university lecturer. He has a PhD on the moral subtext of Aboriginal oral history and has written on the removal of Aboriginal children by the South Australian Government in *The Last Protector* and a collection of short stories, *The Colour of Kerosene*. His film of the same name won Best Australian Film at the Barossa Film Festival in 2013.

First Person Shooter is Cameron's first novel. A stutterer from birth, now an accomplished public speaker, it's the story he was born to tell.

For more on Cameron's work, see www.cameronraynes.com

Discussion Points

Why do you think the writer chose to use the first person (Jayden's) point of view to tell this story? Do you think it works? What might have changed if he'd chosen to use the third person perspective?

What do you think it is about Jayden's experience of stuttering that makes him pick out the image of a dying elephant as one way of explaining how he feels? (See p. 4.)

Why does the writer have Jayden working in a butcher shop? What imagery does this allow him to play with?

There's an occasional reference to climate change as a problem being passed onto the younger generation by the older. (See pp. 33 & 99.) Do you think the writer is in sympathy with the younger generation on this issue?

What has this novel taught you about stuttering and how it is experienced by those who stutter?

Some would say that to be human is to be flawed, or that our flaws are what make us human. Are some flaws more terrible than others? Are some easier to hide? What might be the effect on a person

of trying to hide a flaw as Jayden does when, for instance, he avoids conversation with the backpackers outside Dusty Jackets bookshop? (See p. 79.)

What's the point of Shannon's birthmark? Why did the writer decide to give her this flaw and not some other?

Jayden often feels like a coward; like his stutter is somehow indicative of a lack of courage. Why does he feel like this? Would you consider Jayden a brave person? On what grounds is he brave or not?

Jayden is coming out of a kind of addiction to playing first person shooter games, and uses them still as a form of escape. At one point, when his inability to speak sees one of his best friends get sent out of the classroom, Jayden is left distraught, wishing he were elsewhere: 'I want to be sitting on the blue lounge at home, the blue light washing over me, sweet oblivion. Killing all the bad guys. Aliens, Germans, Muslims, whatever.' (See p. 54.) Do you think there are dangers in excessive exposure to these games? If so, what might those dangers be?

Jayden has a rare moment of fluency when he's telling the vet about Charlie's condition and treatment (pp. 128–130). What does Jayden put this down to, later?

The writer stuttered badly as a child, hid it relatively well during his twenties and thirties, and then had to face it again in his forties. He now sees stuttering not as a curse, but as a kind of gift. In what sense do you think someone could see stuttering in this way? What might be the benefits of stuttering, especially on a writer's development?

Consider this quote by Haruki Murakami: 'Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.' If stuttering can be reframed as a gift, what other disabilities might also be rethought in this way? In each case, how hard do you think it would be for the person with the disability to do this?

Country towns receive mixed press. Some reports focus on the problems of drugs, joblessness and poverty, but the fictional place of Bridgetown also breeds capable, self-reliant people who stand together when times are tough. How does this affect the tone of the book, especially the events of the climax and immediately afterwards? How would these events play out if there was no community solidarity?

Towards the end of the novel, during the stand-off between Pete and Jayden in Shannon's backyard, Jayden 'leans in'. What's the significance of this moment given the interactions that have happened previously between Jayden and Shannon.

Does Jayden's experience of stuttering help him in the final confrontation with Pete? How?

Activities

Exploring social issues: Domestic violence

When the novel opens Madeleine, Shannon's mother, is eight days away from returning home from prison. She's spent the last 5½ years behind bars for the manslaughter of her abusive defacto husband. Madeleine and her daughters were subject to domestic violence. Lately, there has been a renewed emphasis on the terrible costs such violence involves and the legacy it leaves. Rosie Batty, the 2015 Australian of the Year, is a champion for those caught up in domestic violence. Explore the resources that are now available for women seeking to deal with domestic violence. And consider the question: how can men help their cause? The White Ribbon site, <http://www.whiteribbon.org.au>, is a good place to start.

Research: What causes stuttering?

While much research has been done on the causes of stuttering, no definitive pathway has yet been identified. It may be that several factors are involved, with some research centering on those parts of the brain that process speech. Use the internet to find pages like the University of Sydney's 'Australian Stuttering Research Centre' (<http://sydney.edu.au/health-sciences/asrc/>) to investigate the progress that is being made. See, for instance, this article:

- Scott, S 2015, 'Researchers scan babies' brains in attempt to find cause of stuttering', ABC News, viewed 28 December 2015, <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-01-29/researchers-scan-babies-brains-attempt-to-find-stuttering-cause/6055084>

Stutterers who blog and podcast

Search for bloggers who write about stuttering and compare how they write about it with how Raynes does. How does the experience of these bloggers compare with that of Jayden? Here are some sites to get you started:

- Stuttering Story, <https://stutteringstory.wordpress.com>
- Stuttering Student, <http://www.stutteringstudent.blogspot.com.au>

And check out this podcast (<http://stuttertalk.com/answering-a-listeners-email-ep-480/>) on the StutterTalk website as an example of the resources to be found on the internet. This one is on the topic of 'voluntary stuttering', whereby a person stutters *deliberately* at the beginning of a sentence as a way of taking control of the situation and limiting their feelings of shame and helplessness.

Research: Gaming and the Geneva Conventions

In this novel we learn that Jayden's friend, Lucas, is planning to research whether first person shooter games encourage styles of fighting that are against the Geneva Conventions. Do games like *Call of Duty* and *Halo* in some way contravene the rules of engagement of war? Research this topic, beginning with this article, <http://kotaku.com/5865042/its-time-for-a-war-game-that-respects-the-geneva-conventions>, and write a short essay on whether computer games should be adapted to fit in with societal and judicial norms.

Writing exercise: thoughts, feelings and point of view

Taken an incident from the novel and rewrite it using the third person point of view. E.g. 'Jayden woke in darkness, heart thudding ...' (the opening of chapter 6). Think of the best way of showing Jayden's interior life – his thoughts and feelings – in the passage you write.

Writing exercise: unwitnessed events and point of view

Take an incident that Jayden only hears about or witnesses from afar – such as the interaction between Jayden's dad and Stacey King's dad at The Flats (see pp. 162–163) or the scene in which Pete smashes up the Dusty Jackets bookshop (see chapter 19) – and write it from the point of view of another character (e.g. Stacey King, or her dad, or Jayden's dad, or Jess).

Writing exercise: Jayden and Thommo, five years later

Think about where Jayden might be in five years' time. Maybe he's gone to the city; maybe he's studying languages, the thing he hated at school; maybe he's in a relationship with Shannon. Or another entirely different set of outcomes may have eventuated.

In any case, picture this. Jayden runs into the boy who bullied him at school, Thommo. It might happen in the city, at Bridgetown, or on the road, depending on where you imagine Jayden to be. Write the interaction that takes place between Jayden and Thommo, told from the perspective of either young man.

Writing exercise: the canoe trip

Jayden, David, Lucas and Brandon were planning a canoe trip for the summer holidays. Write a short story around this trip the boys make. It could just be based on the conversation and interactions that take place in the car on the way to their launching site. By now, all the boys would know that Jayden saved Shannon, and shot Pete in the leg in the process. Work this reality into the conversation and the interactions in the most subtle way you can.

The experience of stuttering

Jayden imagines words being like beads on a string (p. 96) and talks of scanning ahead and substituting the words he can't say for words he can. Replicate this in your classroom by choosing three letters, e.g. c, m & w. For ten minutes, avoid using any word that begins with one of these letters. How hard is it to do this in a timely manner. How does it affect your ability to express yourself?