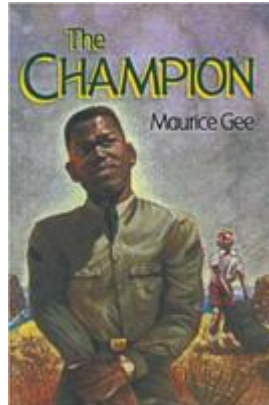


PUKAPUKA TĀWHIRI

The Champion by Maurice Gee

Published 1989



Pukapuka Tāwhiri refers to books that keep calling us back – books that we’ve connected with in the past and continue to emotionally resonate with us. What is it about these books that stick in our heads? Whether the fires of interest are stoked through connections with characters, through particularly vivid imagery, or through exciting themes of magic or mysticism, once burning they can energize us for a future of reading for pleasure. A lifetime of reading is a lifetime of placing ourselves in others’ shoes and a lifetime of learning about people whose lives are different to us. These emotional connections developed through reading occur at a neurological level, but the effects span to a societal one as they teach us how to develop empathy and understand others.

When reading, think about how this book ignites your interest, or doesn’t. Why does it continue to sit on Aotearoa’s bookshelf decades after it was first published? In exploring the themes and characters of *The Champion*, we can find many different elements that readers might resonate with. The major themes are: **heroism, friendship and loyalty, tragedy and loss, and racism and prejudice.**

Before Reading:

The overt racism displayed by several of the characters in this story feels really shocking in 2021 and is uncomfortable to read. The use of words like ‘darkie’ ‘japs’ and ‘nigger’ is really jarring. The language used might generate feelings of trauma for some readers. Discussions would need to be managed really carefully so that exploring this book is safe for all children.

Discuss the historical context of the story.

The Champion is set during the middle of World War Two, in which New Zealand was fighting Japan and Germany. At that time Japanese and German people – even those who had been living in New Zealand for a long time – were considered to be the enemy.

In 1943 Māori were still actively discriminated against. For example, sometimes bars, hotels, cinemas and swimming pools would not allow Māori to enter or have separate areas for Māori and Pākehā. Some landlords excluded Māori people from renting their properties.

And at that time in the USA African-American people were actively prevented from voting in some states (“Jim Crow laws”), particularly in the South where the characters Herb and Marv come from.

More info here:

<https://teara.govt.nz/en/ethnic-and-religious-intolerance/page-1>

<https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws>

Discuss the difference between overt and obvious racism compared with the structural racism and unconscious bias that is still all around us today.

Racism isn't just intentional cruelty by individuals. “Good people” can and often do harbour subtly racist attitudes without realising it, causing unintended harm. And social structures and systems can be inherently racist.

There are some great resources on this subject at:

<https://www.unteachracism.nz/resources.html>

During or after reading:

Themes in *The Champion*

1) Heroism

- At the start of the story, Rex has an idealised version of what a “hero” is, does, and should look like. He associates heroism with war and the things he reads about in comic books. He’s disappointed that Jack doesn’t glorify war and is actually afraid of guns.
- Jack is kind to Dawn. He also saves Alf from being caught by the police, and defends Gloria when Marv tries to force her to dance with him, both at considerable risk to himself.

Possible questions/discussion points:

1. What does Rex think it means to be a “hero” at the start compared with at the end of the story?
2. What do you think it means to be a hero? Do any heroic acts happen in the story?

3. What are some of the characteristics of a hero? (*e.g. bravery, courage, honesty, kindness, integrity, sticking up for people, caring, helping*) Where do you think these ideas surrounding heroism come from? (*such as television, media...*)
4. Who do you consider to be a hero?

Racism and prejudice

- When Jack, who is African-American, arrives in Kettle Creek most people are outwardly friendly to him, but still say terrible things directly to his face without seeming to realise how rude they're being.
- The two other American servicemen in the story, Herb and Marv – who are white – display really overt racist behaviour towards Jack, even though they are soldiers in the same army, and come from the same country.

Possible questions/discussion points:

1. How do you feel about Marv and Herb and the way they treat Jack?
2. Are there any characters in the book who seem to mean well, but still show racist attitudes? Do the things they say and do still affect Jack, even if they mean well?
3. Which characters apart from Jack are also on the receiving end of racism? How does it affect them?
4. How does Rex's attitude towards Jack, Leo and Dawn change over the course of the story? How do you feel about Rex at the beginning compared with at the end of the story?
5. How have things have changed and improved in race relations in Aotearoa New Zealand since 1943 (and 1989, when the book was written). What hasn't changed?

3) Friendship and Loyalty

- Eventually Rex comes to see Jack as a hugely significant person in his life: *What do you answer when people say, 'Who was the most important person you've ever known?' It was Jackson Coop. He changed my life – Jackson and the things that happened in those two weeks.* (Chapter 1)
- The main character and narrator, Rex, exhibits some pretty awful racist attitudes at the start of the story, and so it can be difficult to see him as a sympathetic character. His friendships that develop with Leo, Dawn and Jack change him, and help him to see people for who they really are.

Possible questions/discussion points:

1. What do you make of the characters in *The Champion*? Are they flawed? How does this affect the relationships between these characters?
2. The relationship between Jack and Rex is central to the book. What characterises this relationship, and how does it change?
3. How does Rex see Jack at the start of the book versus at the end of the book?
4. What other friendships does Rex develop in the book, and how do they affect him and his worldview?
5. When Rex says "I've never forgotten Jack, and never will," why does he say this and what does he mean by it?

After Reading: Beyond the Book:

Create a broader discussion surrounding this book and readership.

Possible questions/discussion points:

1. This book was published almost three decades ago, yet it remains a well-known and classic New Zealand book. Why do you think this book has persisted, whereas others have not? Is this book unique?
2. Can you think of any more recent books that remind you of *The Champion*? How do they differ?
3. How did you find the writing style of the book? Discuss a phrase or sentence that stuck out to you, and why it did so.
4. How did *The Champion* make you feel? It's normal to have complex, even conflicting feelings.
5. Did you like the book? Were there any parts which you found odd or confusing? Why do you think this is?
6. What kind of books do you normally like? What is it about these books that call to you? For example, vivid imagery, or characters that you find relatable.
7. Do you think we should read this book over more modern ones? What is the continuing value of traditional books?

Further reading:

The Runaway Settlers by Elsie Locke

The Silver Sword by Ian Serrailier