

MAXIMUS – Teaching notes

By Steve Heron

Illustrations by Tash Macfarlane

Published by Serenity Press

While marketed to 9-12-year-olds, Maximus is a book to be read by people of all ages who have some connection with children. Teachers, parents, chaplains, grandparents, carers, and any children's professionals will find a treasure chest of gems in the story that will encourage and inspire. Many might even say, 'Where was this book when I was a kid?'

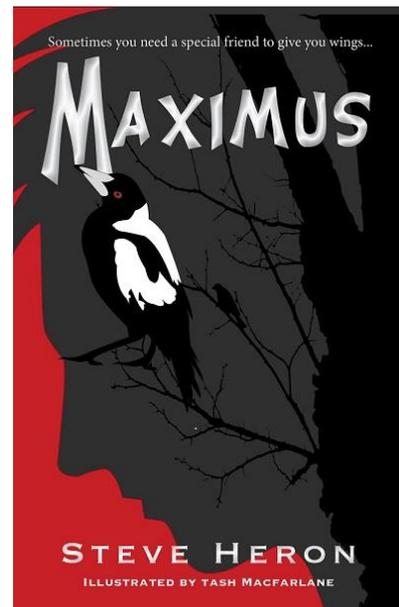
The story would make a perfect class novel to be read with and by children, in years 4 to 6, aligning with elements in the Australian Curriculum in English and especially connecting with the social and emotional learning in the curriculum.

Maximus is a story about balancing the power and encouraging hope.

The tapestry of real-life issues that intertwine with the main and subplots accompanied by believable characters, easy to follow language, and appeal to both boys and girls, make the book quite unique.

The story strikes at the heart of everyday issues that many pre-teens experience and will hopefully help children realise that grief and other life challenges affect their emotions, and in turn, those emotions affect their self-confidence and social connection. When you're down you lose power, when you lose power, you become vulnerable.

Maximus is about regaining confidence and soaring.



SYNOPSIS

Sometimes you need a special friend to give you wings...

Eleven-year-old Mitch is a regular kid who argues about cleaning his room, thinks his younger sister is a pain and enjoys hanging out with his friends. But he's finding life tough going. For one thing, he's being picked on by Jason, both in class and on the football field, and he feels like the spirited Maddy is his only true friend. Even worse, his Fly-in, Fly-Out dad has become increasingly distant and angry, and Mitch misses their father-son time. In Mitch's eyes, 'stuff sucks'!

An encounter with a bedraggled magpie he names Maximus gives Mitch something to look forward to when he's at home. As their connection grows, so too do other relationships in Mitch's life, as his self-confidence grows, he starts to stand up for himself, and the reason for his dad's moodiness is revealed.

Maximus is an engaging, warm-hearted story about family, friendships, self-confidence, and reconciliation, with the gentle message that life is like riding a wave.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

- ✔ Steve Heron was born in Western Australia in 1956.
- ✔ Steve has a passion to power hope in children, especially through children's literature. His love of picture books is shown by his extensive collection.
- ✔ Steve craves to write quality picture books and novels that engage children, at the same time assist them with things life can throw at them.
- ✔ He aspires to *keep it real and unreal for kids* in his books.
- ✔ Steve founded Nurture Works Foundation and developed the acclaimed *BUZ - Build Up Zone* social and emotional programs and initiatives used in many primary schools.
- ✔ He recently retired from 40 years of pastoral work with children to focus on writing.
- ✔ Steve wrote a series of six picture books in the *Feel Safe Feel Right Series* with Nurture Works and self-published *Bully-Proofing*.
- ✔ Maximus is Steve's first book to be published by a Trade Publisher.
- ✔ In 2016, he was listed in the Queen's Birthday honors and received an Order of Australia Medal.

CHARACTERS

Mitch Overton – Main character (protagonist) – Extraordinarily normal kid, Mr Joe average, unassuming, loyal and a little naïve. Likes computer games, birdwatching, and Grandma's brownies.

Maddy (Maddison) Fairweather - a strong independent girl with a spirited sense of humour who is not a girly girl nor a tomboy. Mitch's closest friend. Likes telling jokes, playing footy, taking photos.

Jason Allen – Mitch's Nemesis - Sporty, athletic, leader, slightly arrogant.

Mr (Eddie) and Mrs (Rena) Overton (Mitch's parents) – Middle-class parents trying to get ahead.

Megan Overton (Mitch's little sister) – sweet and sour, spicy and spunky. Switched on.

Ryan Johnson – aboriginal boy oozing with integrity and Noongar cultural awareness, Mitch's slightly estranged friend.

Tiana Olszewski – fiercely energetic, loyal, fast runner, lefty.

Mr Thomas (Year 6 teacher) – Mr Perfectionist, motivated, creative and quirky.

Ms A (Alphonsoramartinez) (School deputy) - Firm, fair and friendly.

Andrew (the school chaplain) – in touch and approachable.

Jack Vodouris – a follower, hardly stands up on his own – shadows Jason.

Li Tan Nguyen – beautifully minded, intelligent, and thoughtful, child and grandchild of Vietnamese boat people.

Fleur Armstrong – Li Tan's friend – quiet, petit.

Crystal Rose Cameron – Queen bee of the plastic populars, thinks she is the best.

Rachel Barton – Crystal's friend, follower, and minion.

Heather Fairweather (Maddy's mum) – a strong, self-motivating and successful widow.

MAXIMUS TEACHING NOTES

These teaching notes will be useful in addressing the Australian Curriculum:

- English content – Language, Literature, and Literacy as well as
- Health and Physical Education content - Personal, Social & Community Health for students in years 4 to 6.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES – AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT (See separate document for content covered and AC Tags)*

THEMES PRESENT IN MAXIMUS

- Friendships (including boy/girl)
- family conflict
- bullying
- self-confidence
- conflict resolution
- loyalty
- grief
- diversity
- Anzac spirit

BEFORE READING

In the story, Mitch says, 'Stuff sucks.' What things get you down at school and at home? Who are your loyal friends? (including adults)

Study the book cover. What does the artwork suggest? What do you think the story is about?

STRUCTURE OF NARRATIVE

Maximus is narrated in the first-person perspective by the protagonist Mitch.

1. Plot the main narrative elements using a story arc (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution). Is there more than one story arc?
1. A critical moment in the story is when Mitch loses his cool and finds himself clouting the tallest child in the class on the chin. What does this moment reveal about Mitch's character?
2. Which event is the high point of tension in the story? How does the author build the tension towards the climax?
3. Are there multiple high points of tension?
4. Who is the antagonist in the story? Remember the antagonist doesn't have to be a person.
5. Is there more than one plot? If so what are they?
6. Are there any plot points that are unresolved at the end?
7. What event could trigger a sequel?
8. What ideas do you have for a sequel?

AFTER READING

Extension: Write a personal reflection of a major change or adverse experience in your life. How did you cope? Did your experience teach you any important lessons or change you in any way? If you are still struggling with some issues, where could you seek support?

Descriptive Writing

The scene with dad losing his cool at the dinner table is a great example – see separate notes.* The author has provided the first draft of this small but powerful segment as well as the final piece of the manuscript. This allows for comparison in the descriptive writing in the editorial process.

Book Review

Write a book review of the novel to provide your opinion. Discuss the writing style, characters, plot, and action. Do you think Steve Heron has managed to write a story that appeals to both boys and girls?

Sample Book Review Template:

Introduce the book with the title in an interesting way

Tell about the book in a captivating way (DON'T SPOIL THE RESOLUTIONS)

The character I relate to the most is because...

I like because...

Favorite part of the story (*The funniest part... My favorite part... I liked when...*)

Recommendation including information about the genre, the age you suggest, and interests

(If you like... I recommend this to...)

QUESTIONS FOR READING, REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION AFTER EACH CHAPTER

CHAPTER ONE: Furry Pizza Crusts

What gets you down at home? Write a list and seal them in a diary or envelope.

CHAPTER TWO: First Encounter of the Feathered Kind

What gets you down at school? Write a list and add to your diary or envelope.

CHAPTER THREE: Irrespective

Write (or tell) about a time you made friends with an animal (other than your family pet).

CHAPTER FOUR: Just a Bubble

What do you like doing with your friends? What makes somebody a good friend?

CHAPTER FIVE: Koolbardi

What do you know about aboriginal culture? Research an aboriginal *Dream-time* story about a bird or animal.

CHAPTER SIX: The Charm

Do you know the meaning of your name? How do we choose names - for people, pets, etc.?

CHAPTER SEVEN: Grandma's Brownies

What kinds of things do parents argue about? What is your favourite grandparent's treat?

CHAPTER EIGHT: The Eruption

Write (or tell) about a time you lost your cool. Use descriptive text.

CHAPTER NINE: Rock-ness

Where is your safe place? Who are your safe people you can talk to? Why is it important to have safe people to talk to?

CHAPTER TEN: Knuckle-Pinkie

What do you think Andrew meant when he told Mitch to *Balance the Power*? Rewrite this in your own words.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: The Big Talk

How would your parents have dealt with this situation? How would you have dealt with this situation if you were Mitch's parents?

CHAPTER TWELVE: Stuff Sucks

What do you notice about the tone of Mitch's poem from beginning to end? Journaling can be useful to express your feelings and help you to move on. Write your own *Stuff Sucks* poem.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Reconnecting

What ANZAC symbol or story means the most to you? Why?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Go the Bayside Blues

The process Ms A. used to help the boys fix their relationship is based on *Restorative Justice*. What do you think *Restorative Justice* means? Do you think it can have a positive outcome?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: Bittersweet

When do you achieve something that lifted your self-confidence? What other things can help us feel better about ourselves?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: The Rosemary Twig

What do you think Martin Luther King's saying means? *Darkness cannot overcome darkness, only light can do that*. Rewrite this in your own words. Write a creative short story about a situation where light overcomes darkness.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: Unsucks

Sucks to Unsucks is Mitch's way of saying changing negatives to positives. Write your own *Sucks to Unsucks* or negatives to positives poem. (In your journal)

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: Symbols and Heroes

What ANZAC symbol or story means the most to you? Write an Anzac poem based on the symbol/story.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: What Dad Said

What does your family do to reconnect after some conflict? What ways does your family celebrate being together and resolving problems?

CHAPTER TWENTY: Popping Candy

Most kids have had a crush on someone at some time. Using descriptive text, write what that feels like. Mitch uses popping candy as a metaphor for that feeling, what can you come up with?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: Caesar

What is the best bit of advice your dad (or mum) or adult role model has ever given you?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: Pride and Respect

The author remembers the chilly Anzac Day mornings and his dad coughing as they got ready at home before the first light. What Anzac Day memories do you have?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: Sand Beards

This chapter sightsees Mitch and Maddy's awkward encounter on the beach. Describe the awkward feelings you get when you want to tell someone something but don't know how.

Mitch says he felt warm, like a marshmallow sitting on hot chocolate (simile) to describe how he felt about Maddy's words about friendship. What simile or expression could you come up with to describe that feeling?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: Wings

Mitch's relationship with Maximus could be likened to the concept of a spirit animal. What would your spirit animal be? And why?

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