The Song of an Innocent Bystander

Ian Bone

What I'm interested in,’ says William, launching into his theme, ‘is how the different players in a siege situation impact upon its outcome . . . It’s kind of fascinating how some people withdraw in a siege situation, others try to fight their way out, and others . . . you know . . . they sort of join in.’ (pp70-71)

Freda Opperman is only nine years old and alone, when she becomes part of a group of thirteen hostages in a siege in a Family Value Restaurant. Over the thirty-six hour siege Freda’s unsophisticated, perhaps innocent sensibilities are confronted with and pulled by events and emotions that have significant effects on her young person. Freda, at the time of the story’s opening is nineteen and yet to confront the past outside the walls of protection her mother, Nancy has built around her. Then along comes William, a young journalist from a student newspaper who wants to write about Freda, and episodes long suppressed are brought to the surface. This is not just Freda’s story, though. It also belongs to Theo Constantine and the perpetrator, John Wayne O’Grady. Other cast members play their parts, but the central trio are the main players.

This book deals with tough issues in a fearless and clever manner, reminiscent of Robert Cormier’s provocative probings of the personal and the political, the corruption of ideals. There are strong and profound ideas to explore such as truth, goodness, innocence, responsibility, corporate greed and accountability. It is also primarily a person’s story, Freda’s, and we see her at nine, thirteen, fourteen, sixteen and at nineteen. How does anyone survive such a situation let alone a solitary nine year old? Ian Bone weaves his themes, emotions and insights in a compelling narrative that reads as much like a whodunit as a slice of hardhitting realism.

There is much to explore in this book and these notes are only a starting place and make suggestions. Any one theme or idea can be chased down through the text in this tautly constructed narrative. There is plenty of opportunity for comparison with contemporary events and current dilemmas about the nature of terrorism, personal and national sovereignty in a global community and large, powerful companies, or nations.

As the novel is so tightly constructed with interwoven elements, the pulling out of ideas and details is problematic. Link them as you see fit. Also as there is narrative significance about the revelations in the book, how you treat some of the following analyses will depend on whether you are working though the books with students as the events unravel, or at the completion of the novel.
Mode of telling
The author uses dual focalisers. Freda’s stories at various ages are told in the first person and present tense so there is an intimacy to her telling, a speaking to the reader.
• Why has the author chosen this? Do you think and what is the effect of it on the reader?
• John Wayne O’Grady’s sections are in the third person. How differently are we the readers positioned in and by the two modes of telling?
• The structure of the narrative is not straightforward and linear: there are events described in the present, flashbacks to the siege, younger Freda interludes and the author speaking towards the end. Is this effective? Powerful? What is the effect of these changes of scene and point of view?
How different would the story have been if it had told the siege story and then moved to present day Freda?

Responsibility
• (p19) – when the siege begins, why don’t the other people take responsibility for Freda? Would you have? Think about the narrative purpose too. How would the story been different if she had been kept with the group rather than with Theo and O’Grady?
• (p22) – being abandoned is a great fear of childhood, perhaps the great fear. Think of the fairytale of Hansel and Gretel, often the most frightening of childhood.
• (p227) – William’s punishing of his mother for abandoning him during the siege.
• What is ‘an innocent bystander’? Is Freda one?

Doing good vs Being good
• Consider Nancy’s tireless work for the victims of crime in Freda’s name and the Guardian Angel Organisation. Is this true altruism ‘doing good’ or is it more complex than that?
• Hugh Opperman leaves his law career to carve, to create. He feels strong connection with the organic wood, has an understanding of it. What is being suggested here?
• (p26) – ‘I shall talk about how one can either be good, or do good, or go for both.’ Who lines up on which side in the book? Which do you think is most important? Which is more difficult to achieve?
• Consider:
  - Hugh’s reaction to the outcome of the siege for him (p79)
  - His quiet spaces for Freda (p131)
‘Hugh Opperman though, has a strong interest in the past. He attends to history as if it were a piece of lumber, examining its grain, seeing early growth and faults and strengths of spirit. It’s in this way he can make the right cut, send the unwanted parts to the workshop floor to bounce and roll amongst the sawdust. The kept piece he caresses, he sands and strokes and cleans, bringing out its best.’ (p 124)
• Do you think that operates metaphorically for Hugh’s role in the story and events?
• How do Theo’s last words fit with the quandary of doing good versus being good?

Metaphysical elements
• Consider the girl in the doorway (p80) when Hugh recollects seeing her. Who is she do you think and why does Hugh see her?
• What about the ghosts in her father’s workshop (p122)?

Dreams
• Freda describes her fear of dreams and what they might reveal. Do they have any connections with or significance for our rational, waking lives? (p94)
• Who is singing? Who is the little girl who sings? (p241) What do you make of the ‘outline of a girl’? (p242)
Words are as important as actions
Consider page 11:

‘What becomes of words once we have spoken them? Do they bounce around in the air like my neglected question? Or do they harden, crumbling into fine particles of dust…My ordeal started with words, a polite request for some stickers…In the end many words were spoken during that siege – hateful words, bitter and angry – but the only words that were remembered were the widely reported dying words of Theo Constantine, restaurant manager and hero, to nine-year-old Freda.’
Make something of this mess. Lead a good life.’
The young survivor should really be wary of famous last words. They carry so many requirements. They place her in a position where she has to ‘live up to…’ as opposed to her natural instinct to ‘live away from…’. They ask her to expect more from the world than she has the right to.’

Freda is referring to her personal situation but do the sentiments have wider application? How differently do you view the import of these words once you know the true origins of Theo’s ‘famous last words’? Do you think Freda’s warning concerning them is a foreshadowing of the revelation of who really spoke them? You might like to examine the opening image from Shaun Tan’s The Red Tree as a visual intertextual connection.

Also consider the significance of the song in the story. Is Freda’s story like a song? And what of the quote from Shelley (p76) re the sweetest song being the saddest. What purpose does Shelley’s poem have in the story? Are words consolatory as well as condemnatory?

Truth
• ‘John Wayne O’Grady says that people are lazy, and they believe in lies because they’re too afraid of what the truth might do to them.’ (p12) What do you think he meant? Why would we be afraid of the truth? What might it ‘do’ to us?

• ‘What is it with my parents that they want to get rid of every single thing that’s been written about me? Are they so careless with the truth? John Wayne O’Grady said that the truth was the simplest thing, yet we do our best to hide away from it.’ (p126) Whose account of events in the story is the ‘true’ one? Can there be any such thing as ‘truth’ when we all perceive and construct external events according to our personal reactions to them?

Irony
Consider irony and its role in Freda’s coping. For example:

• ‘Sometimes the young survivor will attempt to have a say in the management of her survival.’ (p13) Nancy is very controlling. Does she have to be? How crucial is she to Freda’s coping? Do you like her? How would you like having her as a mother? Look at Freda’s reaction to her. She needs her but has saving ironic distance.

• ‘She has steered the conversation away from the maturation of Freda Opperman. She has put aside any mention of independence and self-determination, knowing how much they make my heart race.’ (p14)

• Freda imagines that she will give William the tongue lashing of a lifetime but can only ‘croak’ a greeting. (p16)

• What about the title? Is that ironic do you think?
Corporate accountability

‘This is not food they serve here, this is poison. It is the poison of mass production. It is the poison of multi-national greed and lust. Pack-raping corporations that prey on the masses. Filthy parasites who exploit your gullibility. They are the enemy. They destroy the rainforests, all in the name of beef cattle and hamburger buns.’ (p12)

- How greedy are the food multinationals? How many do you know the names of? Do you work for one? They are big employers of young people aren’t they, so they can’t be all bad?

Freda
- Consider Freda aged thirteen (p54), Freda aged sixteen (p158). What is the role of these interludes in constructing who is she was, who she is and what she has lost?
- ‘Freda . . . that’s a good name for a revolutionary’ (p60). Why does O’Grady say that – who or what is he referring to? Why do you think Ian Bone chose the non-Anglo names for Freda and Theo and Irish/American for O’Grady?
- Freda and Hugh talk about the Indonesian girl, but really about Freda’s past about being or knowing ‘good’ (p80). How different in tone, pace, feel and balance (consider who does the most talking) this is in comparison to Freda’s exchanges with her mother. What is the narrative and emotional significance of this exchange?

Relationships
- Why does O’Grady target Freda to foster and Theo to hate and set them against each other?
- When Freda looks at O’Grady and sees ‘a faint glint of a badge . . . a dusty vest . . .’ (p67) what is being implied? What is meant by ‘What dreams may come of this man?’ (p67)

Causes
- How can O’Grady say on the one hand that he is acting for good and threatening to kill? (p37) Is he mad? Are all fanatics like this? Is his personal grudge the real reason for his act or do you believe he has a wider purpose? Where is the evidence in the book?
- Is there any justification in his cause? Who else do you know has taken up against multi-nationals? Have you joined any such protest? How far would go for your cause?
- Nancy’s causes and her personal motivations (p51), are they similar to O’Grady’s as William suggests? ‘What’s interesting to me is that the tactics that your mother’s organisations have used . . . the litigation against corporations . . . the use of the legal system to bring governments into line . . . wouldn’t you say that the resultant purpose of those actions is similar to what was being advocated during the siege?’ (p74)
- Examine O’Grady’s speech on page 116. Is this his real cause?

Names
- Freda’s Wild West stickers and O’Grady’s response. ‘I am John Wayne and every other hero you could ever imagine. I am your future’. (p40) Was Freda’s fate sealed when she was linked to him via the wild west stickers? Is Ian Bone telling us her aligning with him was inevitable? Or is this merely foreshadowing?
- Is O’Grady setting himself up for failure by giving himself the middle name ‘Wayne’? Is John Wayne still a celluloid hero or a has-been star of ideologically outmoded and outdated films?
- Naomi. What is her role in the themes of the novel? Consider the importance of touch, her giving of the rose – continuity? Closure? The name Naomi is a biblical one. Look up the story of Ruth and Naomi. Are there intertextual meanings? (p255)
- Many of the characters in the siege not given names until the end. When and why? (p170)
Terrorist vs Protester
• What do you make of O’Grady? Is his cause a reasonable one? Look at the ‘invisible man’ speech (p66). Examine the use of O’Grady’s soliloquies and speeches in the novel. Track them down. Do they have a Shakespearian role in the narrative?

Theo
• Was Theo Constantine a hero or a failure? (p24) What makes a hero? Are there any heroes in this story? What about the cook, the Vietnam veteran? (p139)

Innocence – Freda’s role
‘If you are good, then he will be good too. If you are bad…’ she says to herself. (p108)

‘What I understand,’ says Nancy, is that in the eyes of the law, and in the eyes of any right-minded person, you would be innocent. No matter what you said, or did. You’d be innocent.’ (p234) Is that true? Why does being a child confer innocence? Is Freda ‘innocent’? What meanings does that word have in the novel?

Unravelling the mystery and events
There are two unravellings here – of what is going to precipitate the outing of the ‘truth’, and that unravelled outing itself. You might like to predict as you go, looking for clues, hints etc, or return after the denouement to examine the careful construction and paced revealing of the all-important elements.

• Page 4 ‘A gap is a statement, a lack of something, a clear message that there is a void.’
• Page 14 Nancy doesn’t tell Freda which paper the reporter is from. Does that start alarm bells? Does it make you as the reader ask questions?
• Page 22 ‘the girl on the stairs in splashes of red and blue and green (who is that?)
• Page 24 William wanting ‘a chat’. What other clues can you remember now? Skim read again to find them.
• Page 30 ‘A dreadful foreboding haunts me as I walk down the hallway, more than my usual feeling of doom, more than my familiar level of fear. Something is wrong.’
• Page 43 Why do you think the napkins will be important? What do you predict? ‘They were written by a dead man, rescued by a frightened girl and hidden forever by a desperate mother.’
• Page 46 ‘You almost think they’re holding me back’.
• Page 50 Nancy won’t be at the interview – the first time
• Page 67 ‘For a brief moment I think I know him... it is the strangest feeling, a recognition I’ve never experienced before.’
• Page 72 ‘This is the strangest interview I’ve ever had. He seems more interested in his own opinion than mine.’
• Page 76 ‘You have no idea what I want,’ he says. ‘Do you? No idea at all...’ Do you as the reader know?
• Page 84 ‘Both responses to a fright that had nothing to with wet roads or sliding cars.’
• Page 89 – The foreshadowing, or throwing-out of hints: ‘You can’t do bargains with the truth. It’ll bite back and destroy in the end.’
• Page 105 Freda remembers about their silent number and the implications of the caller about the napkins.
• Page 229 The chapter is called ‘In the company of ghosts’ – is there a significance? All others have belonged to Freda or O’Grady. There are other voices here, for example ‘There were no words now to her scream, no pleas or demands, just a cry from her terrified heart.’ We are no longer seeing Freda frown inside or through O’Grady. Why? What is the effect of this shift on the reader?
• Read page 241 from ‘What is innocence in the end?’ to ‘Innocence was weak’. Who is saying this?
Unravelling memories/the truth
- Freda remembering being scared of her mother ‘This is evil… to dredge this up again.’ (p110-111) How much do we accept Freda’s recollection or events as revealed in the O’Grady sections?
- p47 Read the poem referred to: Shelley’s ‘To a skylark’. What significance do you think this poem has to the novel? Find out about Percy Bysshe Shelley. How and at what age did he die? Do you think the use of the poem is a deliberate referencing of his tragic life? How do you relate Shelley’s life and death to the events, and to Freda? Or is it the content of the poem that has significance and resonance, not the poet himself or his life?

John Wayne O’Grady
- Is he a nutter? Is he a bad man? Does he intend to kill? Consider his reaction on page 240 to Theo’s death.

Memory
- ‘Have you ever noticed that memory is everything?’ (p4) Who is Freda addressing?
- ‘I don’t have an easy relationship with this history of mine, filled as it is with horrible stories, with people who sat alongside me in that foul place stinking in their own sweat and fear. History demands questions such as: If I remember this, then why can’t I remember that? It has too many scribbled notes on dusty shelves.’ (p14)
- ‘Memory . . . is a mysterious drink that spills at the most unlikely of times.’ (p28)
- ‘Anyone who tells you that remembering is a good thing is a liar. It is neither good, nor bad. It is not a weight, not a lifting of burden. It is an understanding. A knowledge that goes beyond events and numbers and narratives. It is accepting that when you seek out the past, you know exactly what you are.’ (p244)
- Does this idea of memory and history accord with your experience?

Napkins
- Trace all references to them (such as page 31) an discuss their significance.
- Consider the role of the napkins for Theo (from page 42 through to page 258) He is taking a big risk isn’t he?
- Look at Theo’s description of events on pages 42, 102, 121, 147, 220 and 240. What is the role of Theo in recording it all for ‘all of us’?
- ‘Every act of writing is interpretation.’ How accurate are Theo’s versions of events — at the time, and later when we understand Freda’s state-of-mind? Is she a ‘crazy little bitch’? (p220)
- Freda says to William ‘You might as well read these now. The truth about me is in there.’ (p223) Is she being ironic?

Setting
‘Death was always just around the corner in the underground. We were thrown into the far reaches of our fear. You make all sorts of bargains down there.’ (p221)
The idea of the underground. This is a deliberate choice. What is its significance to the narrative events in the novel, but also metaphorically, symbolically?

Ghosts
- What is the role of ghosts in the novel? (p225) Why does Freda imagine them, and in her imagining of what they’re doing what does that reveal about herself and her state of mind?
- Are they her conscience, some softer part of herself, her true self? (p225)
- ‘Each of use had to steer our own course through his crazy religion .To survive.’ (p221) Is that reasonable or is that Freda rationalising her actions?
Nancy
• ‘My mother is a very practical woman . . . Ordinary things are expected to perform to normal standards. That way she can maintain a sense of control.’ (p5) Is that an accurate assessment of Nancy? Is she as clear-cut as that?
• Freda says of her mother ‘But far greater than that, I’ve seen her part the waves of daily burden for me so that I can walk through life unscathed.’ (p10) This biblical allusion highlights Freda’s necessarily ambivalent attitude to Nancy and is a recognition of her power. Is it real or is it created in Freda’s mind? How important is Nancy to Freda’s survival? How does their relationship change by the end of the novel?
• ‘My mother is a woman with a powerful sense of justice.’ (p6) Freda refers to her as NO. Do her initials sum her up?
• Freda says to Nancy ‘Don’t be so amazed by this gun. Isn’t this situation what you’ve feared all along? This is your nightmare come true, Mum. The furtive scribbling of a long-dead man have finally proven to be correct.’ (p222) Why is Freda so cruel to her mother who has always protected her? Or is she reacting to Nancy’s lack of faith in her – believing that the gun is real?

William
• ‘Boy who had a mother, boy who was protected’ (p222) ‘devious plotter with my deceptive mother’. (p222) This is a difficult complex situation. Do normal standards apply? Can being deceptive be seen as a choice for good or is it always the wrong choice to make?
• ‘You think those napkins are right, don’t you? You think you killed Theo Constantine.’ (p225) ‘I punished her again and again for abandoning me.’ (p226) What is William’s role in the story and why does Nancy keep his identity concealed from Freda for so long?

Symbols
• The gun – consider how it is used and viewed by Freda and O’Grady and the others throughout the story. (such as page 146)
• Why does Freda carve one towards the end? What is the importance of it being carved and Freda’s father recognising it immediately when Nancy and William assume it is real?
• What does this reveal about Freda’s relationships with Nancy and Hugh, and their understanding of her?
• Poetry. Trace where it is used and to what effect. Patterns are for a purpose. (see pages 132 and 258)

The girl
• Hugh sees her on the stairs so does Freda but no one else. Why? (p246)
• Consider the burning of the gun and the burying of the letters. Is there any purpose in those separate acts? (pp 246 and 258) Is there any importance to this ritual, cleansing act? (p247)

Themes
• ‘Do you think it’s possible to ever live a life that doesn’t do damage to another person?’ (p224)
• ‘Someone always has to pay in the end’ (p226) Always? In all circumstances? Who is paying for Freda?
• ‘I’ve never been afraid of your memory . . . It’s what others will do with your memory that frightens me’ says Nancy. (p224)
• How is the encounter with Naomi important? What is catharsis? What does it say about truth?
• What do you know about the Stockholm Syndrome? You might like to research it on the Internet. It is characterised by the following conditions:
  - Perceived threat to survival and the belief that one’s captor is willing to act on that threat
  - The captive’s perception of small kindnesses from the captor within a context of terror
  - Isolation from perspectives other than those of the captor
  - Perceived inability to escape
‘Stockholm Syndrome is a survival mechanism. The men and women who get it are not lunatics. They are fighting for their lives. They deserve compassion, not ridicule.’ Could this be a theme of the book?

- Do you think Freda’s actions during the siege suggest that she was suffering from Stockholm Syndrome?
- What do you make of ‘I would have hugged and kissed [O’Grady] if I thought it would make me safe . . . I felt so much love for the man when he smiled at me.’ (p221)

Activities

Debate

'It is better to do good than to be good'

Drama

Because this book is filmic, (the author addresses this directly on page 83 when he says 'Imagine for a moment a scene from a movie, set in a car’ drawing our attention to it), and for its most part the action is enclosed in one location, it lends itself to dramatic exploration. It would make an excellent transition to stage or screen.

- Students could begin with such an ‘innovation’ on the text as the simple, but powerful act of ‘hot seating’: In a small group, one of you will be Freda, and the others will ask her questions about her experiences. You could do this for the other characters as well, such as Nancy, William, Freda’s father, Theo, O’Grady.

- Imagine Stephen Spielberg is to make the movie of this book. How will it go? Who will play the parts? How will it be different from the book?

- Because the book itself refers to the effects and interests of the media in the events and Freda, it could be fruitful to consider the interpretations presented by different media.

You are a journalist for The Age newspaper who has been asked to write about the siege. You may like to interview the main players and include their reactions. Write a feature article.

You are a journalist from The Herald Sun newspaper and you are covering the story as it breaks. Keep readers interested. You may like to provide visuals for your story. In preparation, consider William’s article (p128-129) as an act of interpretation.

Freda and William have been persuaded to appear on the 7.30 Report/Sixty Minutes/Rove Live. Conduct one or more of these interviews. Consider the reinterpretation and emphasis of events that is offered by each format.

Related Reading

Cormier’s confronting story (his best in my opinion) evokes the events of a hijacking of a bus of children by terrorists seeking the return of their homeland. It uses multiple voices to tell its story: the perspectives of a hostage – the girl driver, a terrorist, an Army general involved in the rescue operation, and his son, chosen as the go-between. The idea of innocence is central to it, as is the relationship between the father and the boy, providing points for connection and comparison with Song of an Innocent Bystander.

Tells the story of an eight-year-old Lebanese-British boy who, like Freda, is caught in a hostage situation. He revisits this past event when invited to write about it by a teacher. The mode of telling, the cathartic purposes, the confronting of ‘truth’ provide points of connection with *Song of an Innocent Bystander*.

The real life story of probably the most famous hostage who came to identify with her hostages and became an active member of the Symbionese Liberation Army.

‘McLibel: Two Worlds Collide’, Documentary film about the libel case mounted by McDonalds against two environmentalists who had been campaigning against the company.
http://www.mcspotlight.org/ or www.spanner.org/mclibel/

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