A KNOCK AT THE WINDOW
THEIR LIVES CHANGED FOREVER

JASPER JONES
DIRECTED BY RACHEL PERKINS

BASED ON THE ICONIC AUSTRALIAN NOVEL

“MASTERFUL…”
ROSS MCRAE, THE WEST AUSTRALIAN

…BEAUTIFUL*

A STUDY GUIDE BY PAUL MITCHELL

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Jasper Jones

A knock at a boy’s window changes two lives forever.

Directed by Rachel Perkins (Bran Nue Day, Radiance), Jasper Jones (2017) is an adaptation of Craig Silvey’s popular and successful eponymous 2009 novel.

It’s the story of Charlie Bucktin, a bookish 14-year-old boy living in a small town in Western Australia in the late 1960s. His adventures with Jasper Jones, an older Aboriginal boy with a mysterious past and potentially dangerous future, make Charlie grow up fast and find courage he didn’t know he possessed.
Jasper Jones (2017) synopsis

Late on a hot summer night in 1969, Charlie Bucktin, a precocious and bookish 14-year-old boy, is startled by an urgent knock on his bedroom window. It's Jasper Jones, an outcast in the small Western Australian mining town of Corrigan. Rebellious, mixed-race and solitary, Jasper is for Charlie a distant figure of danger and intrigue. So when Jasper begs for his help, Charlie takes off into the night with him, terrified but desperate to impress.

Jasper takes him to a secret glade where Charlie witnesses something terrible: a 16-year-old girl, Laura Wishart, Jasper’s girlfriend and the only person he could trust, is hanging dead from a eucalypt tree.

Charlie immediately wants to contact the police. Jasper, however, says they can’t. Because of his Aboriginality he is blamed for everything bad that happens in Corrigan and he believes he will surely be blamed for Laura’s death. Besides, Jasper tells Charlie, he already knows the murderer’s identity: Mad Jack Lionel, the town recluse, a man who it is rumoured killed a woman several years previously and hung her in the local abattoir.

Charlie gives in to Jasper’s wishes and together they hide Laura’s body, agreeing to keep it a secret and catch the real killer themselves.

Jasper disappears for days and Charlie carries the secret heavily, especially when in the company of Eliza Wishart, his unrequited love and the younger sister of the missing girl. As the townspeople of Corrigan, led by the Sergeant, search for Laura, they get closer to the glade every day.
Charlie struggles to contain what he knows and battles to keep a lid on his over-enthusiastic best friend, the Vietnamese and cricket-loving Jeffrey.

Meanwhile, at home, Charlie’s tempestuous mother Ruth dishes out harsh discipline, to which his browbeaten father Wes appears resigned. Charlie feels alone with his secret and his task of helping find evidence to catch the killer. But Jasper reappears at his window one night, they stake out Mad Jack’s house together, and Jasper urges Charlie to break in and find the evidence they need.

When the town Sargent finds and interrogates Jasper, Charlie is determined to find the truth and save his new friend. He goes onto Mad Jack Lionel’s property and looks for answers. Jasper, meanwhile, escapes the clutches of local police and returns to Charlie’s house at night, badly beaten. Jasper is pleased, however, when Charlie offers him the interesting evidence he’s found.

In town, things are beginning to look up after Jeffrey, previously bullied and excluded, helps the local junior cricket team win against their archrivals. But their newfound cheer is stripped away when racist locals vandalise Jeffrey’s family home.

The night of the town’s New Year Fair, Charlie and Jasper decide it is time to act and confront Mad Jack. What they discover is astonishing: Mad Jack is not the killer and he reveals instead a little-known secret about Jasper’s parentage – he is Jasper’s grandfather. Jasper’s father, with whom he has little contact, kept this secret from Jasper to punish Jack for accidentally killing his wife Rosie in a car crash years ago.

Charlie, determined now to tell Eliza what happened to her sister, takes her to the secret glade, but finds that Eliza already knows the truth. Holding a letter from her sister, Charlie and Jasper learn what happened to Laura: her death was a suicide due to her father, a respected town leader, molesting her for years. Jasper, racked with anger and despair, dives into the river. When Jasper doesn’t reappear from the water, Charlie dives in, pulling his friend from the dark waters and back to safety.

In one life-changing summer, Charlie solves a terrible mystery, defeats local racists, falls in love and helps his newfound friend Jasper reunite with his grandfather. But he must also face his parents’ break up as part of his courageous coming of age.

_Jasper Jones_ is a film that shows how understanding your limitations and strengths can help change the world for the better. Against a backdrop of racial tension, misunderstanding and prejudice, _Jasper Jones_ reveals the maliciousness that can lurk behind apparent virtue, and the warmth and integrity that lives in those we often despise. And it asks us to believe that, no matter the danger, standing up courageously for yourself and the truth is always the right path.
About the Director: Rachel Perkins

Jasper Jones’ director Rachel Perkins was born in Canberra in 1970, the daughter of Aboriginal activists Eileen and Charlie Perkins. One of Australia’s leading filmmakers and industry professionals, her Arrernte/Kalkadoon heritage has always informed her career, and she’s passionately committed to creating films that challenge traditional accounts of Aboriginal Australians’ history, while creating new dialogues that empower her people.

Rachel has directed three previous feature films: Radiance, One Night the Moon (which received five Australian Film Institute [AFI] Awards), and the musical Bran Nue Dae. The latter screened at the Sundance, Berlin and Toronto Film Festivals, and took $7.5 million at the Australian box office.

At 18, she moved to Alice Springs to take up a traineeship at the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA). As well as learning filmmaking’s technical aspects, she learnt hands-on the collaborative nature of storytelling amongst central Australian communities. CAAMA co-founder and director Freda Glynn instilled in Perkins the need to empower others and ‘be the instrument for our people to speak through’.

When she left CAAMA at 21, Rachel became the youngest female Executive Producer at SBS Television where she created programming for the Aboriginal Film Unit. In 1993, frustrated by the passive portrayals of indigenous culture she encountered in textbooks and on television programs written by non-indigenous people, Perkins founded Blackfella Films, now Australia’s premier indigenous production company.

From the outset, Blackfella Films committed itself to culturally significant stories, told by and with indigenous practitioners. It produced series such as the three-part documentary Blood Brothers (1993) and From Spirit to Spirit, the first international television series created solely by indigenous peoples, from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Norway.

Rachel worked concurrently as Executive Producer of the ABC’s Indigenous Programs Unit, before leaving to direct her first feature film, Radiance (1998). It dealt with then rarely tackled issues such as the Stolen Generation, racism, rape and adoption. It won numerous awards and helped launch the career of the then relatively unknown Deborah Mailman (The Secret Life of Us, Offspring, The Sapphires).

In 2001 she directed One Night, the Moon (2001) with musician/actor Paul Kelly. A musical inspired by the story of indigenous tracker Alexander Riley, the film examined the impact of racism, respect and social justice. It won numerous awards for Cinematography, Direction, Script, Music and Editing.

The documentary series First Australians (2008) saw Perkins’ commitment to challenging long-established attitudes and historical representation of indigenous perspectives come to powerful fruition. Six years in the making, it presented a never-before seen history of contemporary Australia. Perkins researched and portrayed the indigenous Australian perspective of European settlement through individual stories and accounts gained through extensive community consultation. It received AFI and IF Awards, the UN Media Peace Prize, a TV Week Logie, and the Writers and Directors Guild of Australia Awards. First Australians has sold throughout the world and is the country’s highest selling educational title.

After directing the successful feature film Bran Nue Day (2009), Rachel directed three episodes of the landmark ABC television drama series Redfern Now, which she also co-founded. The series won the 2013 and 2014 TV Week Logies for Most Outstanding Drama Series, and the 2014 AACTA Award for Best Television Drama Series. In those same years Rachel received the Australian Directors Guild (ADG) Award for Best Direction in a TV Drama Series for her work on Redfern Now.
In 2012 she directed the telemovie Mabo, which screened on the ABC to mark the 20th anniversary of the historic High Court decision, and was nominated for Most Outstanding Mini-Series or Telemovie at the 2013 TV Week Logie Awards. In 2014 Rachel completed the documentary Black Panther Woman, which was a finalist in the Documentary Australia Foundation Award for Australian Documentary at the Sydney Film Festival.

Blackfella Films founded the Message Sticks Indigenous Film Festival and Rachel co-curated its program from 2002 to 2011. She was a member of the board of Screen Australia from 2009 to 2013, a Fellow of The University of Sydney Senate from 2011 to 2013, and she is currently on the Board of the Charles Perkins Trust. Though this and other film and television agency work, she has continued to advocate for progressing the agenda of indigenous media employment and training.

With Blackfella Films, she created The Black Book, an indigenous media and arts directory that includes more than 2,600 listings of indigenous individuals and organisations, providing them with further opportunities for professional development. She also co-founded the first free-to-air national indigenous television network (NITV).

Interviewed by Australian Screen website, Rachel said that through her personal life and time at CAAMA she had been brought up to have “personal responsibility to make films or to use media as a vehicle to tell my people’s story and to create change . . . that’s essentially what drives . . . my work.”

Rachel told The Saturday Paper that Jasper Jones is another important, though different project in her storytelling mission.

“Jasper Jones is a new direction for me because it really is a piece of entertainment, primarily. It has a social conscience, but I’m keen for it not to be framed that way. Whether I’ll escape [the political] or not, I don’t know.”

Making Jasper Jones

Director Rachel Perkins said the enthusiasm so many people had offered her and her team had made the task of creating Jasper Jones easier.

“Not only from movie stars like Toni Colette [who plays Ruth Bucktin in the film], but also from funders, politicians, and ordinary Australians; [it] built great momentum for our work, particularly in the south west of Australia where we made the film. It showed me how ‘people’ stories mean things to people and how they will rally around a story they love.”

She said she hoped the film would justify the belief so many people had in her and her team.

“And more broadly, the purpose of stories,” Rachel added, “which in the words of our writer Craig Silvey, exist to promote empathy, to test preconceptions and to transform opinions. The audience will ultimately be the judge if we have succeeded in that quest.”

Jasper Jones was shot over six weeks in Pemberton, WA (pop. 1,000), more than three hundred kilometres from Perth in the heart of a forest. It was an easy choice for the film-makers to portray the fictional town of Corrigan because Pemberton was built at the peak of the timber industry. It has remained almost untouched since its construction, with its original timber houses built between the 1920s and 1950s. The area is lush and green, and although different to the hot desert town described in Silvey’s novel, it allowed an authentic period setting.

“It’s a town,” said Jasper Jones’s producer Vincent Sheehan, “that, for a number of streets, looks exactly as it was in the 1960s. It’s a very particular, almost Twain-esque setting, completely different to the red brick or fibro structures that dominated representation of urban Australia in that time period. It was perfect for the setting of Jasper Jones.”
Pemberton embraced its involvement in the film, offering homes, cars – and people: many residents were extras or background actors in the film. The remote location helped foster a sense of community between the film crew and townsfolk. Cinematographer Mark Wareham said, “When I look at scenes now, I can see my mate who worked at the local bottle shop, and the guy that ran the local store. I’ve got really fond memories of the warmth of the people there.”

To tell this iconic Australian story it was essential to get the right cast for the roles. Director Rachel Perkins worked closely with casting director Anousha Zarkesh to find the young actors.

“He just nailed it. He got the emotion, the fear, the trepidation and he had the youth. He demanded to be cast.”

The next role to be cast was Jasper Jones. Rachel immediately knew she wanted Aaron McGrath, with whom she had previously worked on Redfern Now.

“Aaron has a warm screen presence. That’s the thing about the character of Jasper, he appears as this young Aboriginal hooligan but actually he’s a warm, intelligent and hard-done-by guy who is misrepresented by society. And that is Aaron in lots of ways.”

Casting the role of Jeffrey Lu proved more difficult. Excellent young actors had auditioned, but none had nailed the part. The producers moved onto what is commonly called ‘street casting’. They approached the Vietnamese community directly through schools, sports clubs and other organisations around Australia. After many months, casting director Anousha presented a tape of Kevin Long.

“He just was Jeffrey Lu,” Rachel said. “His parents had come from Vietnam as migrants, he still had a slight accent, he spoke fluent Vietnamese, he was incredibly confident and positive in the way that Jeffrey Lu has to be growing up in that world. Kevin embodied that character.”

Hugo Weaving (The Matrix, Lord of the Rings, Hacksaw Ridge) plays Mad Jack Lionel in Jasper Jones. He said working with the young actors was an enjoyable experience for the adult cast members.

“It was lovely working with Aaron and Levi. I don’t often work with younger actors . . . It’s quite lovely to work with actors who are young and full of life and energy, vibrancy and vitality. They’re excited and they want to learn.”

Another extra dimension in making Jasper Jones was the presence on set of Craig Silvey, co-screenwriter and author of the novel.

“Not only did he write the novel and the shooting script, he then turned up to set every day to support the creative process to its conclusion,” said director Rachel Perkins. “Being an Aussie movie tight on money, he had to bunk down in my accommodation to do so. Having the writer literally in the next room and equally enthusiastic to endlessly dissect the film was the greatest asset. He also baked great banana muffins.”

Craig Silvey told ATOM that the most gratifying aspect of the process for him had been seeing so many talented people dedicated to making the film a reality.

“Everyone who worked on this project approached it with a really sincere belief, so it has been thrilling to be privy to their efforts. It was an amazing gift to be on set and watch these scenes come together, and to appreciate how every link – from producers to the director, the art department, costumes, lighting, sound, and, of course, the cast – contributes to that. Having come from a novelist’s solitary background, it was exciting to be a part of a team.”
The Cast

LEVI MILLER (CHARLIE BUCKTIN)

In 2014, Levi starred as Peter Pan in the Warner Bros. film Pan, directed by Joe Wright and co-starring Hugh Jackman, Garrett Hedlund and Rooney Mara. It was his first major film role and, at the age of 12, he was cast after a worldwide search. On the small screen Levi recently filmed an episode of Supergirl, in which he played the role of Carter Grant, the son of Calista Flockhart’s character. His upcoming work includes the Chris Peckover directed Safe Neighbourhood.

ANGOURIE RICE (ELIZA WISHART)

Angourie has caught the attention of producers and directors worldwide. She began her career in Perth with several short films and national television commercials, and first came to industry attention with her work on Zak Hilditch’s short film, Transmission. Previous films include Walking with Dinosaurs 3D and Nowhere Boys: The Book of Shadows, while she has made small screen appearances in Mako Mermaids and The Doctor Blake Mysteries. She recently worked on the Shane Black directed film The Nice Guys, opposite Ryan Gosling and Russell Crowe.

AARON MCMGRATH (JASPER JONES)

Aaron made his feature film debut as Joseph in Around the Block. He is a regular on Australian screens, working consistently since he first appeared as a young teenager on My Place. His television credits include Ready For This, The Code, Glitch, Doctor Doctor, The Secret River, Redfern Now, The Doctor Blake Mysteries and The Gods Of Wheat Street. He worked on the short films Destiny in the Dirt and Jackey Jackey, and the 60 Minutes re-enactment of the Lindt Cafe siege. He was also part of the ABC3 team that covered Sydney’s 2016 New Year’s Eve celebrations.

KEVIN LONG (JEFFREY LU)

Playing the character of Jeffrey Lu in Jasper Jones is Kevin Long’s acting debut; the film’s casting director Anousha Zarkesh discovered Kevin at his martial arts school in his hometown of Western Sydney. Kevin is a natural performer; he sings and plays guitar, and he kept the crew entertained with his sleight of hand card tricks. He has already received critical acclaim and praise for his performance as Jeffrey.

DAN WYLIE (WES BUCKTIN)

Wylie’s breakthrough film role was in 1990’s Spotswood alongside Anthony Hopkins. This was followed by notable performances in Muriel’s Wedding, Romper Stomper, Holy Smoke, The Thin Red Line, Peter Pan, Animal Kingdom and the James Cameron-produced Sanctum. In recent years Wylie’s screen credits include The Hunter opposite Williem Dafoe and Sam Neil, Roi de Heer’s feature film Charlie’s Country, and Russell Crowe’s feature film directorial debut The Water Diviner. A regular on the Australian small screen since his 2006 TV Week Silver Logie Award for Most Outstanding Actor in a Drama Series for Love My Way, Wylie has appeared to acclaim in Underbelly, The Shark Net, Bastard Boys, Puberty Blues, Offspring, No Activity, Gallipoli, Rake and The Beautiful Lie.

MATT NABLE (SARGE)

Recently appearing in Mel Gibson’s Hacksaw Ridge, Nable wrote and played the lead in Paramount Pictures’ first Australian acquisition, the critically acclaimed The Final Winter. He headed to the US and appeared in features such as The Killer Elite with Jason Statham, Clive Owen and Robert De Niro, and 33 Postcards with Guy Pearce. He also appeared in Rob Connolly’s The Turning, with Hugo Weaving, Cate Blanchett and Rose Byrne. On the small screen, Nable starred in East West 101, and played Detective Sergeant Gary Jubelin in Underbelly: Badness. He starred in Bikie Wars: Brothers in Arms, and appeared in Gallipoli, Quarry, Arrow, Barracuda, The High Road and Hyde & Seek.

TONI COLLETTE (RUTH BUCKTIN)

Since her breakthrough role in Muriel’s Wedding, Collette has become one of Australia’s most recognised and celebrated actors, having worked internationally in film, television and theatre. She has won Emmy and Golden Globe awards, and received a 1999 Academy Award nomination for her role in The Sixth Sense. She appeared opposite Hugh Grant in About a Boy, receiving a British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) nomination, and the critically acclaimed The Hours alongside Nicole Kidman, Meryl Streep and Julianne Moore. She has also appeared in the features Japanese Story, In Her Shoes, Little Miss Sunshine and Evening. The hit series United States of Tara was Toni’s first foray into US series television. Her work saw her receive an Emmy and Golden Globe Awards for Best Actress in a Comedy Series. Collette’s upcoming work includes the features The Yellow Birds (alongside Jennifer Aniston), opposite Daniel Radcliffe in Imperium, and alongside Dakota Fanning and Helen Hunt in Please Stand By Me.

HUGO WEAVING (MAD JACK LIONEL)

Weaving has enjoyed a varied and successful career in film, theatre and television. He has won numerous awards, including three Australian Film Institute (AFI) awards for Best Actor in a Leading Role: in Jocelyn Moorhouse’s Proof, The Interview – for which he also won Best Actor at The Montreal World Film Festival – and Little Fish. In 2011, he was an inaugural AACTA award winner for his performance in Oranges and Sunshine. He is also well known for his roles in The Adventures Of Priscilla, Queen Of The Desert, as Agent Smith in The Matrix trilogy, as Elrond in The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit trilogies, and as ‘V’ in V for Vendetta. He has also voiced characters in several highly successful films, including Babe, Happy Feet and Transformers. In 2013 Weaving was President of the Sydney Film Festival Jury.
Themes in *Jasper Jones*

Issues of race, gender roles and courage are the coming-of-age tale *Jasper Jones*’s overarching themes. These themes are pivotal to the narrative and provide the core for most of the conflict and character development.

As this Guide discusses in detail later, the historical context for *Jasper Jones*’s explication of race issues (rural Australia 1969), especially concerning Aboriginal people and those from a Vietnamese background, is significant. The film is something of a time capsule for the way in which Australia dealt with these issues, but at the same time it could be argued it provides evidence that the ‘more things change, the more they stay the same.’

While there are numerous ways in which the film deals clearly with racial prejudice, notably through the Aboriginal character of Jasper, Mad Jack Lionel’s attitude to race is what effectively sets the film’s story in motion. It is he who at first rejects his son’s marriage to an Aboriginal woman, Rosie. This pits his son against him for life. But then, unbeknownst to his son, he develops a friendship with Rosie, who looks after him in his times of illness. Yet he is too proud to admit his mistakes to his son. When Mad Jack Lionel accidentally kills Rosie in a car accident, his son’s hatred for him is cemented forever, and he never reveals to his son Jasper that Mad Jack Lionel is his grandfather.

Mad Jack Lionel’s racial prejudice is the film’s narrative fulcrum, and his confession and healing – along with how it heals Jasper – is a large part of the film’s resolution.

Likewise gender issues are significant. The film is set in the heart of second-wave feminism, and Charlie’s mum Ruth becomes a symbol for its social impact. She refuses to accept her situation; the docile housewife in the country town for the respectable schoolteacher. She wants more in life, and she goes about getting it (drinking, dancing, buying her own car, and having an affair). Charlie grows up fast as he witnesses the complexities of his parents’ relationship, which is itself emblematic of the changes in gender roles that swept Australia from the late 1960s onwards (increased women’s rights, more opportunities for women outside the home, and no-fault divorce).

The theme of identity versus belonging is strong in *Jasper Jones*. Naturally, because the film is an archetypal *bildungsroman*, how Charlie’s identity develops is central to the narrative. Charlie is caught between his father’s cautious and bookish personality and his mother’s more outgoing,
adventurous persona. At the same time, interestingly, his father is the gentle hand in his life whereas his mother is the stern disciplinarian. Like all early teenagers, Charlie is trying to forge his own identity while knowing that, at some level, he must continue to belong to his family. So we see his risk-taking by following Jasper into a world of adventure as one way in which he is forging his own identity, but later we see he ends up belonging very much to his father and the town of Corrigan.

Other characters experience similar crucibles in regard to identity and belonging: Wes struggles with his desire to be identified as a writer while knowing he must belong to Corrigan as a conservative teacher (largely for his son's sake); Ruth is desperate to assert her identity and finds belonging in Corrigan beyond her capabilities; Jasper, though he doesn't realise it, is on a search for identity that is much deeper than he, or anyone could have expected; the Lu family are struggling with forming an Australian identity in a place in which they are told forcefully they don't belong; Eliza Wishart must come into an identity that means she cannot belong in her family due to the lies it perpetuates; and Mad Jack Lionel's identity – and personality – means he belongs to Jasper, and to the town, if it were to finally put away its racial prejudice in the way he did when relating with Rosie.

Other key themes emerge in the film, including the theme of secrets: the entire Wishart family, Charlie, Jasper, Mad Jack Lionel, Sarge, Ruth and Wesley all carry significant secrets in the film. How these are revealed and to whom plays a significant role in the story's development and asks the audience to consider which secrets we should keep and which must remain hidden forever.

The theme of real life vs stories plays out via Charlie's bookishness, a trait he shares with his aspiring novelist father. The audience finds itself considering to what extent we hide away in the stories we tell ourselves rather than deal openly with the realities we face. The theme of adventure vs duty is related to this and plays out as we consider bookish Wes taking on the thugs, Charlie taking the risk to help Jasper, and Ruth looking at her mundane existence and deciding to take action.

Overarching all of these is the theme of courage. The young characters all grow through developing the courage they need to take action, as do Wes and Ruth. The Batman vs Superman motif, that Charlie and Jeffrey spar verbally about, is the key one via which this theme is made explicit to the audience, even if it is implicit in the story's resolution.

**Discussion Questions for Jasper Jones's themes:**

- Do you agree with Charlie's eventual conclusion that Batman is braver than Superman? Why or why not?
- What does the character of Ruth reveal about gender roles in late 1960s rural Australia?
- In what way are real life and fantasy life pitted against each other in *Jasper Jones*? Think of the characters, especially, of Charlie and Wes.
- How might the *Jasper Jones* story have unfolded if Jasper were not Aboriginal?
- Identify all the secrets that each of the characters in *Jasper Jones* carry at one time or another in the film. Which of these would you find most difficult to keep? Why?
- You have the opportunity to write a letter to Jeffrey after his mother has hot water deliberately spilt on her during the town meeting. What will you say?
Adapting *Jasper Jones*

Fremantle-based Craig Silvey’s best-selling novel *Jasper Jones* was published in 2009 to popular and critical acclaim. In the year of its publication it won the WA Premier’s Award for Fiction, and in 2010 it won the Australian Book Industry Awards Best Book prize and was short-listed for Australia’s most prestigious literary award, the Miles Franklin.

Before its screen adaptation, playwright Kate Mulvany adapted the novel for stage. Perth’s Barking Gecko Theatre Company premiered it in 2014, while in 2016 Sydney’s Belvoir St Theatre Company and the Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) performed it (the MTC production of *Jasper Jones* is a prescribed production for VCE Theatre Studies: Unit 4). The Sydney Morning Herald said when reviewing Belvoir Street’s production, “Mulvany’s adaptation is written for six actors juggling a dozen or so characters. Quick transitions and seamless flow are crucial to its success and, for the most part, director Anne-Louise Sarks’ production unfolds the story clearly and smoothly.”

One of the key necessities in adapting *Jasper Jones* to screen was to ensure it maintained, as the play did, the book’s ‘page-turning’ quality. As well as being a work with powerful themes, *Jasper Jones* is a who-dunnit and, as director Rachel Perkins explained, ultimately a work of entertainment that had to engage a broad audience.

Every screenwriter adapting a novel faces two related key issues: 1. How do I cut this story back for film without losing the essence? and; 2. How do I ensure I do not alienate fans of the book, but ensure viewers unfamiliar with it are satisfied?

“I have a very clear vision for what the story is and what it is trying to do, and it was important to me that those considerations were front and centre in the screenplay.”

SILVEY

In a novel, an author can define and explore characters through their inner worlds and thoughts, via an endless combination of literary devices for which there are no rules. In the novel, *Jasper Jones*, we understand the world almost entirely through Charlie Bucktin’s eyes. He speaks to us directly through his thoughts (and in the play by addressing the audience directly about what he saw and how he felt). Charlie is essentially an observer, a thinker, and his journey through the novel is a passive one; readers grow to understand and know him via what he sees and how he describes himself as feeling.

Cinema, on the other hand, is a visual medium, where characters are defined more by their actions than their words. And a fundamental principle of classical storytelling for cinema is to have the central character active and driving the story. Therefore, a critical starting point for the adaptation from novel to screenplay was to find a narrative structure that made Charlie more active, made his choices drive the story, and made him the ‘hero’ in a cinematic way. We had to ‘see’ Charlie’s journey and know that he had changed by the choices he made and the actions he took.
Working with co-writer Shaun Grant (Snowtown, Killing Time), screenwriter Craig Silvey, as the novel's author, had a more intimate understanding of these issues than might be expected of another writer. Silvey told ATOM that the key to making the appropriate edits was understanding which aspects his readers had responded to most passionately.

“The challenge . . . was in divining ways to express those ideas visually, more economically, and in a way that adhered to the strictures of film-making. Ultimately, it’s about understanding the intention of a scene or a story beat: what it is, what it does and why. If you’re clear about that, you can find a way to concentrate it, or express it in a more lateral or efficient way.”

That said, Silvey admitted he had to fight hard to keep certain sections of the novel in the screen version.

“The cricket scene was a battle that was years long and hard fought. There were other elements that I would have loved to stuff into the film, but I just couldn’t justify. The motif with the peaches is one that comes to mind, [but] we were able to articulate Charlie’s journey towards understanding the nature of courage without that particular thread . . .”

Many authors avoid involvement with screen adaptations of their work. But Silvey felt that because of idiosyncratic aspects of the Jasper Jones story, including characterisation and dialogue, he was best qualified to bring it to film along with his co-writer, Shaun Grant.

“I have a very clear vision for what the story is and what it is trying to do, and it was important to me that those considerations were front and centre in the screenplay. Also, I really love film, so the opportunity to write a screenplay seemed like a fantastic challenge.”

Despite the story’s oft-cited connections with To Kill a Mockingbird, that was not a film adaptation Silvey drew upon for inspiration.

“I understand the film is supposed to be a masterpiece, but I love the novel so much that I don’t ever want my private interpretation of it interrupted or influenced by the film, which invariably happens with any adaptation,” he said, adding that Paper Moon (1973) was a touchstone for him. “The screenplay for Paper Moon was a real triumph. It’s a beautiful film, and really captured the soul of its source material whilst staking its own claim on it.”
The Two Jaspers: Differences Between the Film and the Novel

There are a number of significant differences between the book and the film, too many to list in detail. However, some differences include:

- the feat of bravery represented by stealing peaches from Mad Jack Lionel’s tree is absent from the film, along with Charlie’s fear of insects;
- the book depicts Charlie as having more obvious admiration for his father and more obvious dislike for his mother. In addition, his mother Ruth’s near death when giving birth to a now deceased daughter is absent, along with any clear mention of her background as a rich former city dweller;
- unlike the film, the book shows Charlie fantasising about leaving Corrigan with Jasper, and driving around Australia with him like the protagonists in Jack Kerouac’s novel On the Road;
- Charlie is the first in the book to see the vandalism committed on the Lu family’s garden, but it is his father in the film;
- in the film, Charlie discovers the word “sorry” etched in an old car in Mad Jack Lionel’s yard. In the book it is Jasper;
- the brief scene in the film during which Jasper and Charlie confront Mad Jack Lionel about the past takes place over an hour in the book;
- Jasper leaves Corrigan for good in the book, but in the film he is reunited with Mad Jack Lionel and may or may not be leaving Corrigan.

Below are a number of questions aimed at stimulating discussion about differences between the book and its film adaptation:

- The Superman v Batman motif is key to the theme of bravery in the film, whereas in the book it is stealing peaches from Mad Jack Lionel’s tree. Why might the peach tree incidents have been deleted from the film?
- Why might the screenwriters have chosen Wes to first notice the violence against the Lu family rather than Charlie?
- Which ending do you prefer: the novel’s or the film’s? Why?
- Why might the screenwriters have chosen to make Sarge the man with whom Ruth is having an affair, rather than an anonymous man as in the book?
- In the film, Charlie seems never to consider leaving Corrigan. Why is that important for the film’s narrative drive?
- There are, of course, a number of examples in the film of sections from the novel being condensed. Identify one and discuss whether it is effective and why.

Jasper Jones as Comparative Text

With its focus on how racial prejudice can blind people to the truth, Jasper Jones the novel drew comparison with Harper Lee’s magisterial novel To Kill a Mockingbird, which focuses on similar themes. The Jasper Jones film is likely also to see comparisons drawn between it and To Kill a Mockingbird’s book and film versions.

After Laura Wishart is found dead in Jasper Jones, the Aboriginal character Jasper is sure that, like the African American Tom Robinson in To Kill a Mockingbird is unfairly blamed for the rape of a white woman, he will be blamed for Laura’s death. It is this certainty of racial prejudice that gives Jasper Jones’s plot its momentum. Without this racial prejudice, Jasper would not have wanted to hide Laura’s body and would not have involved Charlie Bucktin in his plan to find the killer. It follows, then, that Charlie’s character could not have developed without this chain of events.

The role of Mad Jack Lionel in Jasper Jones is similar to the one played by Boo Radley in To Kill a Mockingbird. Boo Radley (Robert Duvall in the film version) is the recluse who lives in a shambolic house and never ventures outside. Local kids, including main characters Scout and Jem Finch, are scared of Boo’s house and the legend of potential cruelty associated with Boo Radley. Entering his yard and other tests are seen as evidence of bravery in To Kill a Mockingbird. However, the novel and film reveal Boo to be a kind character, a fact he exhibits in numerous ways, especially to main character Scout.

Likewise, Mad Jack Lionel is the local recluse in the fictional town of Corrigan. He ventures outside of his
also shambolic abode a little more often than Boo, but myths and legends associated with his potential cruelty abound, rumours that are oiled by his gruff and abrasive manner. In Jasper Jones the book (but not the film), stealing peaches from Mad Jack Lionel’s tree is seen as an act of the highest bravery. And, like Boo in To Kill a Mockingbird, Mad Jack Lionel is deeply misunderstood and beneath his tough exterior lies a tender heart.

To Kill a Mockingbird was first published in 1960 and the film version appeared in 1962. Both were set in America’s south during the 1930s Great Depression. The story concentrates on a period when white America’s racial prejudice against African Americans, especially in the south, was a daily reality. In terms of its publication and first screening, it predates much of the Civil Rights movement’s activity in the 1960s. However, the book and film were enormously popular and critically acclaimed, and the To Kill a Mockingbird story can be seen as one of American culture’s touchstones for the social changes that burgeoned in the 1960s and continue today.

Jasper Jones is set in rural Australia (viewed by some as parallel to the American south) in 1969, after many of America’s civil rights upheavals – Martin Luther King’s freedom movement, Vietnam War protests and second-wave feminism – had begun. But social upheaval was a reality in Australia and the Jasper Jones story unfolds at a time when the old order – white Australia, female subjugation, cultural conservatism – was being destabilised. Although they had been allowed to enroll to vote since 1962, Aboriginal people were not included in the census, nor could they have laws made for them until the 1967 referendum voted for the necessary constitutional change. Yet Australia in the time of Jasper Jones was deeply divided about the place of Aboriginal people in the nation, a fact that the film (and book) reflects, and a reality to which the film speaks today.

The racial issues studied in Jasper Jones are perhaps more diverse than those in To Kill a Mockingbird. The former includes a Vietnamese minor character, Jeffrey Lu, who is main character Charlie Bucktin’s best friend. The Vietnamese boy suffers bullying, despite his love of and skills in cricket and, therefore, his desire to fit into Australian culture. His family also suffers bullying and abuse, a result of the then Vietnam War’s toll on Australian soldiers, particularly one family in Corrigan.

The film (and book) is set just one year prior to Australia’s first Vietnam moratorium in May 1970. More than 200,000 people took part, eventual Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in the 1972 federal election campaign promised to ban conscription, and by the end of that year all Australian troops had been withdrawn from Vietnam.

Jasper Jones: Questioning Our History

1. Consider the ways in which Jasper Jones deals with racial prejudice and subjugation of women in late 1960s Australia. Does the film clarify for you the attitudes that existed at that time, especially in rural Australia?

2. How might the film have been different if it were set after the Vietnam War?

3. Write a synopsis for Jasper Jones in which the setting is a capital city in current day Australia.

4. In what way does the character of Mad Jack Lionel represent Australia’s racial past and its potential future?

5. What would you change about how Jasper Jones describes Australia’s history?

Key Scenes: Close Study

SCENE 1 - 1:05:56 – 1:12:56 (Jasper and Charlie confront Mad Jack Lionel in his house)

It’s crunch time as Jasper, with Charlie reluctantly following along, steps past his fear and into Mad Jack Lionel’s home. Fearing having to leave Corrigan forever, Jasper wants to know once and for all why Mad Jack killed Laura. Charlie fears for his and Jasper’s lives.

1. What is important about the scene being set at night, and at the same time as the New Year’s Eve fair?
Questions

PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS

1. What do you know of Australia in the 1960s? Note your thoughts about the politics, economy, entertainment and race relations of the period.

2. What other feature films have you seen that have had main Aboriginal characters? How did those films affect your understanding of Aboriginal culture and history?

3. Have you seen many ‘whodunit’ films? What key ingredients make them work?

4. What other ‘coming of age’ films have you seen? What, in your opinion, makes them successful?

QUESTIONS IMMEDIATELY POST-VIEWING

1. What would you say are Jasper Jones main themes?

2. To which character did you relate the most? Why?

3. What questions did the film leave in your mind?

4. Of which other films did Jasper Jones remind you? Why?

5. How close to today’s situation is Jasper Jones’s depiction of race relations in Australia?

EXTENDED RESPONSES/ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Jasper Jones says racial prejudice is inevitable. Discuss.

2. Secrets are a necessary part of life. Discuss with reference to Jasper Jones.

3. Jasper Jones tells us that risky behaviour results in heartbreak. Do you agree?

4. Jasper Jones’s female characters are pawns in the hands of men. Do you agree?

Jasper Jones Resources

- ‘Jasper Jones review: Kate Mulvany’s adaptation stands tall despite slight falter at end’, Sydney Morning Herald, 7 January, 2016.