



## ***DARKEST NIGHT, BRIGHTEST STAR***

Written by BARRY JONSBERG

**RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 12–18 YEARS OLD (YEARS 7 – 12 SECONDARY)**

**GENRE:** Young Adult Fiction, Realist Fiction

**THEMES:** family relationships, resilience, hope, toxic masculinity, friendship, sport

**CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:**

- English: Literature, literacy and language

**NOTES WRITTEN BY:** Barry Jonsberg

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## PLOT SUMMARY

Thirteen-year-old Morgan lives with his dad and his older brother, Mitch. He hasn't heard from his mum since she left when he was two. He works hard on his football skills, striving to meet his father's high expectations and 'be a man'.

But what that means isn't always clear-cut. When Morgan makes a friend at school, gets injured in a game, and his long-lost mum turns up, everything changes. Then, when he meets an old woman in need of help, Morgan must decide what kind of man he wants to be.

Shining a timely and much-needed light on different kinds of masculinity, *Darkest Night, Brightest Star* is a unique and compelling novel from a masterful storyteller.

## Q&A WITH BARRY JONSBURG

### How did you get the idea for *Darkest Night, Brightest Star*?

'The same way I get all my ideas – a chance remark, a random thought, an article, even an image. In this case, *Darkest Night, Brightest Star* had its beginnings following a conversation I had with my wife Anita. She came home from work one day – she is an English teacher in a secondary school – and wanted to unpack. I know that teachers need to do this from my own long experience in the classroom. She told me that one of her students said to her, without clarifying the context, that he always tried to please his father but thought he never would. It goes without saying that she did not reveal the identity of this student. We agreed that this was a sad and rather moving remark. It prompted us to have a conversation about our own experiences of the kind of pressures that parents can sometimes exert on their children. Anita recalled the time she came home from school as a teenager and told her father that she had got 97% in a maths test. He did not congratulate her, but rather asked where the other 3% had gone. These comments can remain with someone for a long time! I proffered my own experience. My two older siblings had not gone to University and my mother and father made it very clear that, as the youngest, I was their last chance to achieve what was clearly *their* dream, not necessarily mine. So I told them I would study to be a doctor. They were thrilled. Unfortunately, I wasn't very good at science. I did get to University to study English Literature and they were pleased, though I still think they would have preferred having a doctor for a son.

'So how often do we make decisions about ourselves based upon what other people, especially families, would like us to do? It reminded me of the poem by Philip Larkin, *This Be The Verse*, which starts, 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad/ They may not mean to, but they do.' The full poem can be found here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48419/this-be-the-verse>

'I started *Darkest Night, Brightest Star* the following day.'

### **You don't often write about sport. Why in this book?**

'It seems to me that in Australia particularly, sporting prowess is held in very high esteem. We tend to worship our sports stars. And fund them. Wouldn't it be nice if reading attracted the same enthusiasm and funding? I digress. Anyway, the protagonist in the novel, Morgan Pickford, is trying to live up to his father's dreams of success and the sporting field appeared to be the natural theatre for someone of his father's background. Want to see an Aussie legend? Look to the sports fields.

'The first version of the novel had Morgan playing cricket but, for various reasons, the sport didn't quite gel with what I had in mind. So I rewrote the book with football (or soccer, if you must) as the sport that Morgan's father decides his son will excel at. I was much more at home with this, since I am a football tragic and lifelong supporter of Liverpool Football Club. In the book, Morgan is encouraged to look to Diego Maradona as a model, as someone whose skills he should aspire to. I thought this was appropriate for a number of reasons. Maradona was a footballing genius but possibly not the best man he could have been. He also, in the same match against England in the quarter finals of the 1986 World Cup, produced both the Cheat of the Century and the Goal of the Century. As an England football supporter this still hurts me. Both of these events are referred to in the book. If you're interested, here is the Cheat of the Century, better known as the Hand of God: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-n7lWYm4Vc>

And here is possibly the greatest goal ever scored: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oaxnk-Si6lY>

### **Do characters change during the writing process?**

'Oh yes. I mean, it's obvious that characters *must* change, otherwise the novel would be flat and uninteresting. But characters also diverge from what the writer expects when he or she starts to write and I find this incredibly exciting. Take the character of Morgan's father. I had a firm idea when I started the book that he would be a clear example of toxic masculinity, of someone sexist, misogynistic and racist and that his influence on his son would be something that Morgan would have to fight against. In other words, Morgan's father was to be revolting, a symbol of all that is wrong with some men who believe themselves superior and incapable of making mistakes.

'As the writing progressed, however, he became something other than just a stereotype (thankfully). He loves his sons and he tries, according to his own values, to do the best by them. Is it his fault that he is wrong? Or is he the victim also of a set of beliefs that are sometimes passed on from generation to generation and become almost impossible to resist?

'It's easy to portray toxic males as stupid and abhorrent because their values clearly are. But people are complicated and are rarely simple villains. I started off loathing Morgan's dad and ended up feeling a bit sorry for him. I'd be interested to know if you feel the same.'

**What is the most important thing that you would like readers to take away from this book?**

'Phew. Tricky one. Don't try to be something that you are not? Forge your own path?

'In the end, it comes down to this. The novel is fundamentally about toxic masculinity and the damage it causes (though, hopefully, it also shows hope that things *can* change). Wouldn't it be fantastic to say that this set of beliefs (does it merit that term?) is on the decline, that men are getting better as time passes? Yes, it would, but from my perspective, it's getting worse. The popularity of online influencers like Andrew Tate are well documented, as is the trend for young men to be increasingly attracted to these views, especially through social media. And don't get me started on what the election of Donald Trump says for the future of liberal views and the acceleration of male dominance. Or how Meta is fine about referring to women as 'it'. I'm scared for what all this means. So what would I *like* readers to take away from this book?

Men need to be better. Men *must* be better.'

## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

### BEFORE READING

- Have students make notes on what they think 'darkest night, brightest star' means a) literally and b) as a metaphor. Compare views.
- Try the 'two truths and a lie' exercise that starts the novel (possibly giving the same advice that Mr Simmonds gives to his students). Volunteers can read out their three statements and then answer questions about each one, so the class can vote on which they think is the lie. This may provide insight into how we form judgements about truth or untruth by the ways/forms in which they are presented to us.
- Have students make brief notes on what they would have liked to have achieved by the time they are 25 years old. In small groups, students should attempt to define the word 'happiness'. Why are abstract nouns so difficult to define?

A resource on abstract nouns vs concrete nouns can be found here:

<https://www.grammarly.com/blog/parts-of-speech/concrete-vs-abstract-nouns/>

- What concrete nouns can students find that might apply to the word 'happiness'?

### ENGLISH

**Note:** Check that all resource links are current and suitable for your class before choosing which activities and links to use.

Text structure and organisation; Engaging with and responding to literature; Analysing, Interpreting and Evaluating: Year 8: AC9E8LE02, ACE9E8LE03, AC9E8LY01, AC9E8LY05, ACE8ELE06; Year 9: AC9E9LE02, ACE9E9LE03, AC9E9LY01, AC9E9LY05, ACE9ELE06  
Year 10: AC9E10LE04, AC9E10LE03, AC9E10LA03 AC9E10LE08, AC9E10LY03

Teachers of Year 11 and 12 should check for learning outcomes from their own examining bodies.

Chapter 1:

- We learn in the first chapter that 'I think my mother is dead and alive' is one of the truths that Morgan wrote down. In groups suggest how this can be possible. Share ideas on the whiteboard.
- Mr Simmonds asks if Morgan's mother is Schrödinger's cat, an allusion that Morgan doesn't understand. Have a look at this resource: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjaAxUO6-Uw> to help explain the reference.

Chapters 1-2:

- What are our first impressions of the character of Morgan in the opening two chapters? Make a list of words and phrases that might be appropriate – confident/shy/articulate? Back up those ideas with evidence from the text.

- Similarly, what are our first impressions of the character of his father? Refer to evidence from the text.

#### Chapters 3-4:

- If possible, take students outside with a soccer ball and get them to practise the juggling skills that Morgan's father suggests on pages 10-11 – kicking the ball five times in the air without it hitting the ground and then doing the same with the other foot. Compare experiences and have a discussion on how hard this is to achieve and whether students consider the work involved (specifically repetition) to be valuable in building skills. Does this also apply to schoolwork? A resource on Growth Mindset can be found here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUWn\\_TJTrnU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUWn_TJTrnU)
- What are our first impressions of Gray? How does the writer convey these impressions?
- In Chapter 4 Mitch tries to hurt his brother in the backyard game. Write a short account, from Mitch's point of view, of the conflict, paying particular attention to Mitch's feelings about his brother.

#### Chapters 5-6:

- What do the parent/teacher interviews in Chapter 5 tell us about a] Morgan's attitude to schoolwork and b] his father's attitudes? Use evidence from the text to support your views.
- In the practice football match at Sheldon's, Morgan disappoints his father because he tries to give another player a goal-scoring opportunity. Draw up a list of pros and cons on Morgan's decision-making.

#### Chapter 7:

- Write a description of Morgan's oral presentation on Maradona from the perspective of another student in the class. Before writing, decide what kind of character that student will be – sympathetic/embarrassed/someone who delights in the humiliation of others – and frame your writing accordingly.
- What does the conversation after the oral presentation tell us about the character of Mr Simmonds? Does Morgan deserve to pass? Give reasons for your judgements.
- 'Oral presentations are not worth the paper they aren't written on.' Using persuasive techniques, argue for or against this statement in a form of your choosing – a report, a PowerPoint presentation, an essay, an oral? Some persuasive techniques can be found here: <https://www.lingualbox.com/blog/16-effective-persuasive-language-techniques>

#### Chapters 8-10:

- How does the argument between Mitch and his father further develop their characters?
- Morgan has a conversation with Miss Farmer, the school counsellor. Why, in your opinion, does she choose to initiate this conversation?

- Gray tells Morgan that Miss Farmer helped him out 'loads with his identity', a comment that puzzles Morgan. Do students have any predictions regarding this clue to Gray's struggles with his identity?
- Gray tells Morgan that he was selfish in attempting to score a goal when he might have passed to another player. Have a look at this video which shows examples of selfish and unselfish behaviour in a football match:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxSLvLk4MCK>

Is Gray's comment fair? Compare with the viewpoint of Morgan's father in Chapter 6 when Morgan 'threw away the match'.

- What else do we learn about the character of Mitch in these three chapters?
- What are the readers' first impressions of Mrs Guy's character? Refer closely to the text.

#### Chapters 11-12:

- Write about Morgan's meeting with his mother from his mother's perspective.
- Read Morgan's description of the accident in the game and then describe the same accident from the perspective of the goalkeeper.
- What impressions of Harley (Mitch's girlfriend) do we gain in these chapters?

#### Chapters 13-14:

- Look at way Harley is portrayed by Mitch and Morgan's father. What stereotypes about women are employed here?
- Consider Gray's anger at the use of the word 'slut'. Then look at these resources about:
  - a) Gendered language  
<https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/understanding-gender-inequality/0/steps/66842>
  - b) Connotation and denotation  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MXUou9vFtQ>

Ask students to find their own examples of how literal meaning and connoted meaning may differ, especially in regard to gender (Gray's examples of 'stud' and 'player' might be a good starting point).

- Why does Morgan hit Gray?
- What does the meeting between the headmaster and Morgan's father tell us about the latter? Compare with his meeting with teachers at parent teacher night in chapter 5. Using Word Cloud create a list of Morgan's father's attitudes and beliefs.

#### Chapters 15-16:

- Examine the reasons why Mitch beats up Morgan. What does this tell us about Mitch's character?

- Morgan discovers that Mrs Guy suffers from dementia. Resources on dementia can be found here: <https://www.dementia.org.au/>

What hints are given prior to this chapter that foreshadow this revelation?

- Why does Morgan spray paint offensive words on the school sign?
- What does his meeting with his mother tell us about her character?
- Write a diary entry from Gray's point of view regarding his meeting with Morgan at the park.

#### Chapters 17-18:

- Before reading chapter 17 have students brainstorm what they think might be a productive or effective way of dealing with the criminal damage Morgan has caused and what punishment, if any, he deserves. Then look carefully at the Real Justice conference in Chapter 17. Do you think the conference was effective? Real Justice is a system that has been used in Australia for many years. Students could research its methodology and philosophy here: <https://banr.foundation/real-justice/>

- Teachers may also choose to watch a Real Justice conference, Facing the Demons, which is available on Clickview (subscription required. Many schools are members. Free trials are available)

<https://online.clickview.com.au/exchange/categories/22715/religious-studies/videos/40245/facing-the-demons?referrer=https%3a%2f%2fwww.google.com%2f>

Warning, this film is confrontational and emotional and deals with a meeting between a murderer and the family of his victim. Discretion is required especially when dealing with younger students.

- Look at the conversation between Morgan and Gray on the bridge. In what ways does this scene help to explain the common ground that Gray sees between himself and Morgan?

#### Chapters 19-20:

- 'Gray was right. All the people on *Gardening Australia* looked like nerds.' What do you think constitutes a 'nerd'?
- Have a look at an episode of *Gardening Australia* here: <https://www.abc.net.au/gardening/episodes>

What evidence can you find to support or disprove Gray's assertion? You might care to look at age, dress and language employed to support your views.

- Morgan works on his back garden, planting shrubs. Does he appear happier in this activity when compared to his football games? Find evidence to support your views.

#### Chapters 21-22:

- Given your understanding of Morgan's father's character, why does he choose to defend himself at his trial for assault?

- Write an account of the trial from the perspective of Morgan's father.
- Look carefully at Mr Simmonds conversation with Morgan about 'selling his time'. Revisit the work done in the Before Reading section about what students hope to achieve or possess by the time they are 25. Then search for costings. Draw up a list of expenditure needed to support that lifestyle. You will need to budget for things like accommodation (rent or mortgage), travel/transport, food, clothing, holidays, insurance and any other costs that occur. Then research pay scales for various occupations and compare to your budget. What kind of job will you need to obtain to achieve your life's goals? Is Mr Simmonds correct in saying that qualifications are essential in achieving those goals?

### Chapters 23-25

- Read Chapter 23. When Morgan, in his meeting with Mrs Guy at the Golden Sunset Residential Home, says he will try to find her lemon trees, what do you think he intends? Create a list of suggestions.
- In the final chapter, Morgan and Gray reveal the Sean Guy Orchard. Bearing in mind her dementia, write the scene from the viewpoint of Mrs Guy.
- In what ways is the ending of the novel hopeful?

## ASSESSMENT IDEAS

### CREATIVE

- Look at Chapter 20 (in particular, page 212). Morgan's mother says: 'The thing with that idea of masculinity ... is that it can get passed on from one generation to the next.'

Write a short scene that imagines Morgan's father having an interaction with *his* father which helps to explain how he behaves in the novel. Remember to *show*, rather than tell. More information on 'show, don't tell' can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YAKcbvioxFk>

- Read Chapter 11, where Morgan has his accident in the soccer game, and Chapter 12. Write a report for a local newspaper (or an online article for that newspaper) that features the accident at the game and the incident afterwards involving Morgan's father.
- Select one section of the novel for cinematic treatment. Produce a storyboard and director's notes about lighting, shots, cuts, angles and sound that demonstrate how that part of the novel could be communicated via film to the audience. Resources can be found here:  
<https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/cinematography-techniques-no-film-school/>

## ANALYTICAL (ESSAY OR PARAGRAPHED IDEAS)

- How does the writer explore the idea of different types of 'masculinity' in the novel?
- Jonsberg said, 'I started off loathing Morgan's dad and ended up feeling a bit sorry for him.' Discuss the ways in which Morgan's father is presented in the novel.
- How has the character of Morgan changed throughout the course of the novel?
- In Chapter 20 Morgan has a conversation with his mother in which she is more direct in her views about her ex-husband. She says that 'toxic masculinity ... can get passed on from one generation to the next.' (p.212). What evidence can you find throughout the novel to support this view?

More information on toxic masculinity can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blUgEsqpG-0>

## IN THE WORDS OF THE AUTHOR

'I had fun with this one. Then again, I had fun with all of them.'

'I have to confess that I'm a bit addicted to first person narration, especially since that allows me to explore the idea of the unreliable narrator. If the world is presented solely through one pair of eyes, then, by definition, that world will differ from the views of others. The reader, one hopes, will see that conflict of views and gain better insight into the character of the person narrating.'

'Anyway, many of my books use first person narration from the perspective of an intelligent and articulate young adult (though, as I say, that doesn't make their version of events correct). In *Darkest Night, Brightest Star*, I wanted to write from the viewpoint of someone who isn't articulate, has very little confidence and considers himself inferior academically to his peers. Again, just because Morgan sees himself as unintelligent doesn't mean he's right. In fact, I firmly believe he's wrong and hope the reader shares my view. So, Morgan just puts down what he thinks, sees and feels without any literary pretensions.'

'It's quite difficult to write unadorned prose, I found...'





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**BARRY JONSBERG** is a multi-award-winning international author, published in twenty countries and translated into fourteen languages. His book, *My Life as an Alphabet*, was made into the award-winning film *H is for Happiness* starring Richard Roxburgh and Miriam Margolyes in 2019. Negotiations are underway for a Broadway musical based upon the same book.

## CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

(In alphabetical order of authors)

### ONLINE LINKS IN FULL

Poetry Foundation, *This Be The Verse* by Philip Larkin:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48419/this-be-the-verse>

YouTube, Maradona – Hand of God Goal 1986 World Cup:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-n7lWYm4Vc>

YouTube, Maradona wonder goal v England Mexico 86:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oaxnk-Si6lY>

Grammarly, Concrete Nouns vs. Abstract Nouns:

<https://www.grammarly.com/blog/parts-of-speech/concrete-vs-abstract-nouns/>

YouTube, Schrödinger's cat: A thought experiment in quantum mechanics:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjaAxUO6-Uw>

YouTube, Growth Mindset vs. Fixed Mindset:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUWn\\_TJTrnU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUWn_TJTrnU)

Lingual Box, 16 Effective Persuasive Language Techniques:

<https://www.lingualbox.com/blog/16-effective-persuasive-language-techniques>

YouTube, Selfish & Unselfish Moments in Football:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxSLvLk4MCK>

Future Learn, What is Gendered Language?

<https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/understanding-gender-inequality/0/steps/66842>

YouTube, Denotation vs. Connotation (1-Minute Lesson):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MXUou9vFtQ>

Dementia Australia:

<https://www.dementia.org.au/>

Building A New Reality, Real Justice:

<https://banr.foundation/real-justice/>

Clickview, Facing the Demons:

<https://online.clickview.com.au/exchange/categories/22715/religious-studies/videos/40245/facing-the-demons?referrer=https%3a%2f%2fwww.google.com%2f>

Warning, this film is confrontational and emotional and deals with a meeting between a murderer and the family of his victim. Discretion is required especially when dealing with younger students.

ABC, *Gardening Australia*:

<https://www.abc.net.au/gardening/episodes>

YouTube, How to Show, Not Tell: The Complete Writing Guide:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YAKcbvioxFk>

StudioBinder, A Beginner's Guide to Cinematography Techniques:

<https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/cinematography-techniques-no-film-school/>

YouTube, How is hyper-masculine content affecting Australian Teens?:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blUgEsqpG-0>