

Home Grown Resources

The Time Riders' Code: novel
(ISBN 0 9581 7820 8) and
Teacher's Booklet (ISBN 0 9581 7823 2)
Changing My Mind: short stories collection
(ISBN 0 9581 7822 4) and
Teacher's Resource Book (ISBN 0 9581 7821 6)
by Judy Keen
Published in 2002 by Cumquatmay, PO Box 80,
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reviewed by *Tim Sprod*

Australian teachers seem to have a different attitude to teachers in some other countries. They are very resistant to “turn-key” programs: teaching material that sets out exactly what the teacher should do in lesson after lesson. Few Australian courses in schools are textbook driven. Rather, Aussie teachers prefer to use textbooks as resources, picking and choosing good ideas and incorporating them into their own schemes of work.

I have often thought that this explains two phenomena. Firstly, while they often recognize the richness of the Lipman novels and (especially) the supporting manuals, few Australian teachers have been willing to commit themselves to working through Harry, or Lisa, or Pixie, chapter by chapter for a whole year. Secondly, Australia seems to have produced a plethora of home grown materials for teachers who want to do philosophy

through the community of inquiry in their classrooms.

Many of these materials allow teachers to dip in and select what they will use and when. Phil Cam's *Thinking Stories* spring to mind, as do works by Colleen Abbott and Sue Wilks, Chris de Haan and her collaborators, Matthew del Nevo, Clinton Golding (actually a New Zealander), Michael Parker, Laurance Splitter and myself (a list of these works can be found at the end of this article). Now, Judy Keen has added two more excellent publications to this list, though they are quite different from each other in style.

Judy is, like me, a Tasmanian — indeed, we first met when we were both enrolled in Philosophy 1 at the University of Tasmania as undergraduates straight out of school. Judy went on to major in Philosophy and Psychology, and now works as a guidance officer in Tasmania's state education department. Over the years, our paths have crossed often, as we ended up living in the same suburb, attending playgroup and other community events with our children of roughly the same ages, and of course through our mutual interest in philosophy in schools.

Readers of Jen Glaser's web reviews in *Analytic Teaching* may well recognize Judy's name. She has, for quite a few years now, run the web based Owl Project “<http://ubertas.infosys.utas.edu.au/>” <http://ubertas.infosys.utas.edu.au/> — a site for school aged and younger children that includes philosophical activities such as the Philosopher's Tea Party. It is in her work for the Owl site that Judy first developed the material that is now published as *The Time Riders' Code*.

Let's look at the two contrasting books Judy has now published.

Due to the way *The Time Riders' Code* was originally published — the 13 episodes were posted on the Owl Project site at regular intervals and students were able to log on to grapple with the next installment — it is meant to be used sequentially. The story follows a girl and her eccentric scientist uncle as they go time travelling.

Initially transported back to Mesopotamia in 1800 BC, they time hop their way back towards the present at regular time intervals, but irregularly across place. What results is a rich narrative that introduces historical, geographical, mathematical, logical and philosophical activities. In considering the times and places they visit alone, there are myriad opportunities for research, and students will gain a neat overview of recorded world history. Even the time interval chosen — 360 years — turns out to have interesting mathematical and historical properties. Throughout the book, the theme of codes consistently reappears.

As a basis for an integrated classroom project that spans many weeks, *The Time Riders' Code* clearly has great potential. Although it is a sequential program, its openness across disciplines allows plenty of scope for spin-off activities, and it can (as Judy suggests) be used in a variety of ways, from a whole class project to individual extension work.

Readers of this journal, however, probably wish to know more about the philosophical possibilities. There are plenty, but before reviewing some of them, I want to welcome the appearance of a resource that includes philosophy into an integrated project. There are many resources around now that take a multi-disciplinary approach, and most of these have interesting philosophical puzzles embedded in them. It is exceedingly rare, however, for the accompanying teacher's materials to make those puzzles explicit, or to offer guidance about how to explore them productively with the class. That Judy's book does this is surely one of its great strengths.

The philosophical opportunities raised by time travel are many, from some well-known time paradoxes, through questions about the relativity of morals in different times and places, to the big question of the nature of time itself. All these and more are in Judy's text. Wisely, she does not confine herself to the philosophy of time travel. Other philosophical questions raised include the

nature of personal identity, possibility and impossibility, the theory of Forms, the nature of communication, multiculturalism, the rights of original inhabitants and refugees, and the nature of truth. There are, inevitably, a series of practical ethical questions — or some that on first appearance are not so practical, such as the episode raising the ethics of trading with the past. Judy does give this a practical twist, however, drawing in the teacher's notes the parallel of developed countries trading with developing ones.

On top of these, every episode includes a logic puzzle. While most of these are of the type found in newspaper puzzle corners or mathematical texts, a couple address the nature of logic itself. Indeed, in episode six, they can grapple with the basics of syllogistic logic from a conversation with no less a logician than Aristotle himself.

The Teacher's Booklet includes guidance to the teacher on all these different aspects. Answers are given to all the closed problems — when and where they are, the mathematical and logical puzzles. In addition, there is a brief but very useful section on running a community of inquiry, together with suggested discussion questions.

Changing My Mind, on the other hand, is not really a new book at all. Rather, it is a most welcome revamping and republishing of the best stories from Judy's earlier *BrainStrain* series, published by MacMillan in 1997. I am certainly glad to see it, as I have for some time been recommending the previous version at workshops, with the added warning that it was out of print and hard to get.

Philosophical stories intended as triggers for discussions come in all sorts of sizes. We are all familiar with Matt Lipman's lengthy novels. More recent materials, like Phil Cam's *Thinking Stories* (many, in the first two volumes, written by other authors), contain shorter stand-alone stories. Even so, these are often many pages long and may take longer to read than a Lipman chapter. Such chapters and stories are often packed with many philosophical hooks — so many, some are seldom picked up by students after they have read the story.

Personally, I prefer to keep triggers I write myself short — often around 500-1000 words — and to include just a few philosophical ideas. They are vignettes or fragments of children's conversations, really, not functioning as stories in their own right. The advantage, as I see it, are that the reading does not take long, the central

philosophical ideas are seeded, and there is not a surfeit of rich ideas. Lacking literary skills, I write them as tools for triggering discussion, nothing more.

Judy's stories are also short — she fits twenty into eighty A5 pages. However, no one could say that they do not function as stories. Each is a beautifully crafted tale well worth reading for its own sake. They are upbeat and quirky, and she has a lovely way of rounding off many of them with a surprising and satisfying sting-in-the-tail. They remind me of Paul Jennings, the very popular Australian writer for children. International audiences may find them a little reminiscent of Roald Dahl, particularly in his short stories for adults, rather than his children's books.

Hence, they work on both levels. They are excellent vehicles for a wide variety of interesting philosophical puzzles, and they are also satisfying literature. *The Teacher's Resource Book* (but, interestingly, not the story book) divides the stories into four sections: Self and Others, Monsters and Weird Things, Critical Thinking, and Big Heavy Questions. Here are some of my favorites — one from each section.

The title story, *Changing My Mind*, involves a boy genius, his friend, a cat, a chicken and a mind-swapping machine. After a chaotic, botched demonstration of the machine, the friend starts to design a better mousetrap, while the inventor scratches for worms. In under a thousand words, Judy provides humour and surprise, with a lovely soft touch, as well as setting the scene for the discussion of personal identity, the nature of mind, human and animal thoughts, inventions, thinking, truth and several other themes.

In *The Podoperous*, two campers hear something snuffling outside their tent. 'It's a dangerous podoperous', one tells the other, and makes up a description. As they increasingly scare each other, the second camper peeks out and is suddenly reassured. After all, podoperous don't have sharp teeth, and this thing outside does. With impeccable Goon-, or Monty Python-, like logic, Judy plays with fantasy and reality and, again in a few pages, raises questions about logic, possibility and impossibility, fear, imagination and existence, the notion of everything and naming.

Modern confusion about the boundaries

between art and the everyday are cleverly exploited in *Artful*. The protagonist's father sends a giant cabbage to his art gallery owning brother, where a pretentious buyer mistakes it for an exhibit and buys it. The connections between art, beauty, artist's intentions, happiness and permanence are all possible avenues of exploration.

In *Mid Life Crisis*, a busy cloning researcher suddenly spends all day at home reverting to his hippie past. His (unnamed) son/daughter has to work out what is going on — though this leaves quite a few puzzles still. Questions of hypothesizing and testing, identity, motivation, and even the concept of the middle are seeded in the reader's minds.

All these stories share a number of features, apart from being under four pages long. The protagonist in each is unnamed and seldom assigned a gender. Hence, they generally appeal equally to both boys and girls. Although my brief plot synopses above show that the basic idea underlying each is often a familiar one, all display a deft humorous touch and a far from obvious or clichéd handling. I have used each of these stories, and quite a few more, a number of times with students from Year 3 to 12, and even adults. They always work a treat.

It is always a pleasure to see new materials published for exploring philosophical ideas in the classroom. When they are of the quality of these two offerings, it is an added delight. One can only hope that they, along with the growing body of similar materials available now, achieve a significant impact in bringing philosophical inquiry into the classroom mainstream.

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