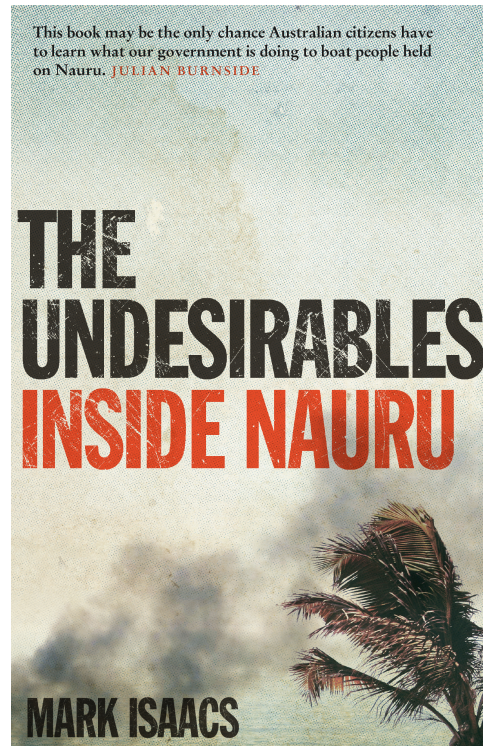




TEACHERS' NOTES

The Undesirables

By Mark Isaacs



A READER'S INTRODUCTION

"*The Undesirables*, an account from within the asylum seeker system, is all the more powerful a record for the unpretentious voice of the author. The tale Mark Isaacs tells is angry but disarming, since Isaacs himself is a bewildered pilgrim...*The Undesirables* is packed with surprising instances of sometimes small-scale but continual attrition of the spirits of the detained." Tom Keneally, author

"...not only a compelling read but also a powerful expose of the truth about the pain we are inflicting on the most needy. The horrors of indefinite incarceration under the hideous conditions of Nauru have been revealed with great skill, empathy and insight. It is a must read for all Australians." Robin de Crespigny, author of *The People Smuggler*

"This book may be the only chance Australian citizens have to learn what our government is doing to boat people held on Nauru... It is a compelling account of the human reality of Australia's Pacific Solution." Julian Burnside (Foreword to *The Undesirables*)



ABOUT THE BOOK

When it comes to asylum seekers on Nauru, we learn only what the Australian government wants us to know. *The Undesirables* is a rare eye-witness account of life inside the detention camp.

Mark Isaacs went to work inside the Nauru detention centre in 2012. As a Salvation Army employee, he provided humanitarian aid to the men interned in the camp. What he saw there moved him to write this book.

The *Undesirables* chronicles his time on Nauru, detailing daily life and the stories of the men held there, the self harm, suicide attempts, and riots; the rare moments of joy; the moments of deep despair. He takes us behind the gates of Nauru and humanises a political debate usually ruled by misleading rhetoric.

In a strange twist of fate, Mark's father, Professor David Isaacs, travelled to Nauru in December 2014 to investigate how children were treated in detention. *The Undesirables* reveals the human rights abuses Professor Isaacs discovered on Nauru, and interrogates how little has changed for people in detention.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Isaacs is a writer, a community worker, an adventurer, and a campaigner for social justice who became impassioned by the asylum seeker debate after a visit to Villawood Detention Centre while writing for Oxfam.

In September 2012 Mark was employed by the Salvation Army to work at the Nauru Regional Processing Centre. While in Nauru, Mark established the Receptions program and the Oceans program for asylum seekers. He resigned from the Salvation Army in June 2013 and spoke out publicly against the government's No Advantage policy.

After returning from Nauru, Mark was employed at an asylum seeker settlement agency in Sydney where he currently works. In 2016, he travelled to Afghanistan with the Edmund Rice Centre to report on what happens to asylum seekers who are returned to Afghanistan by the Australian government. Mark is currently working on his next book about peace activists in Afghanistan.

Mark appeared in Eva Orner's 2016 documentary *Chasing Asylum* and has written for Foreign Policy, World Policy Journal, Huffington Post, New Internationalist, Mamamia, New Matilda and VICE.



NOTE TO TEACHERS

Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, teachers need to approach the teaching of this text with care and awareness that students may find some of the text upsetting.

The text's mature themes and content means it is best suited to senior English studies. It would work well in Unit 1 VCE English or the state equivalent, particularly, the **reading and creating texts** area of study. Schools could also use the text to generate an oral point of view for the **presenting argument** area of Study in Unit 1.

This text is also suitable for Unit 1 English as an Additional Language [EAL].

To this end, the text could be used to assess the following outcomes:

Unit 1 English/EAL

Area of Study 1

Reading and creating texts

Outcome 1

Produce an analytical response to *The Undesirables* (oral/multimodal or written).

OR

Produce a creative response to *The Undesirables* (oral/multimodal or written).

Area of Study 2

Analysing and presenting argument

Outcome 2

Create a text intended to position an audience (oral/multimodal or written).

Please note: Schools must use different texts to assess the analytical and creative responses and can only assess one task in oral or multimodal form. For further information, please consult the English/EAL Study Design on the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority's website.

<http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/vce/studies/english/index.aspx>



PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Listening/viewing

1. Sarah Ferguson's interview with Mark Isaacs at the Sydney Writers' Festival

Students can watch the interview or listen to the audio. The video and audio files can also be downloaded.

<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/bigideas/stories/2014/07/30/4057400.htm>

2. *The Four Corners* episode which aired during Isaacs' fourth rotation:

'NO ADVANTAGE' by Deb Whitmont and Janine Cohen, Monday (29 April 2013)

<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/2013/04/29/3745276.htm>

Students can watch the episode and read the transcript of the episode. This site also features video interviews with Major Paul Moulds of the Salvation Army; Dr Kieran Keke, former Nauru Foreign Minister and Professor Gillian Triggs, President, Australian Human Rights Commission.

Reading

<http://www.smh.com.au/national/mark-isaacs-reveals-the-secrets-of-the-nauru-detention-centre-20140314-34rur.html>



BACKGROUND READING/RESEARCH; VOCABULARY BUILDING

In pairs, investigate the following key terms or topics. Summarise your findings into three dot points for each key term/topic and be prepared to share your findings with the class.

1. Undesirable
2. Detention Centre
3. Asylum seeker
4. Humanitarian
5. Human rights
6. Compound
7. Oppression
8. Civil war
9. The Salvation Army
10. Whistleblower
11. Nauru Regional Processing Centre
12. The Pacific Solution
13. Offshore processing
14. Sri Lanka's civil war (Tamils and Sinhalese)
15. Afghanistan and Hazaras and Pashtuns
16. Pakistan and Hazaras and Pashtuns
17. Rohingyas from Burma
18. Iraqis
19. Iranians
20. Non-fiction
21. Memoir
22. Recount



LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Reading journal

At the start of end of each class, ask students to write for five minutes, recording brief responses to *The Undesirables*. Ask them to reflect on their earlier responses in relation to their later responses. What do they notice about their different responses? What do they think has influenced similar, deepened or different conclusions?

Considering the world of text: small group activities

Author's context

Read the INTRODUCTION (pp.1-6). Summarise for your peers via dot points:

- who Mark Isaacs is;
- what motivated him to work in Nauru;
- his employment history and
- his level of experience with humanitarian work.

Support your finding with five quotes.

Geographical/historical/political context

1. Using information from this site:

http://www.aph.gov.au/about_parliament/parliamentary_departments/parliamentary_library/pubs/bn/2012-2013/pacificsolution

Briefly summarise for your peers, in dot points, and where appropriate, via visuals:

- the Pacific Solution;
 - where Nauru is;
 - where Sri Lanka, Burma, Pakistan, Iran & Iraq are on the world map &
 - the countries involved in the Pacific Solution.
2. Read Julian Burnside's FOREWORD to *The Undesirables*. Summarise, in dot points, what led him to the conclusion: 'The treatment of asylum seekers who arrive by boat has been one of the most divisive political issues in Australia's recent political history.' (p.x)
 3. Read Julian Burnside's FOREWORD to *The Undesirables*. Create a concept map which summarises all of the key stakeholders involved in the issue. An excellent basic 8-point graphic organiser concept map can be downloaded from here:
<https://goalbookapp.com/toolkit/strategy/graphic-organizers>



4. Read Julian Burnside's FOREWORD to *The Undesirables*. Create a timeline which summarises the background to the issue. List the key dates, events and turning points. An excellent timeline and sequence graphic organiser can be downloaded from here: <https://goalbookapp.com/toolkit/strategy/graphic-organizers>

Physical setting

To build students' understanding of the world of the text, invite them to create a concept map documenting:

- what Isaacs sees when he begins work in the setting of Nauru;
- how he feels in this physical setting;
- important locations in this physical setting &
- the broader symbolism of the physical setting.

Encourage students to support their observations with quotes. For example:

- "The heat in Nauru is oppressive." (p.8)
- 'Watch out for feral dogs. They can be aggressive.' (p.10)
- 'You can drive around the country in thirty minutes.' (p.10)
- "There was one main store...The Nauran people lived in beach shacks...roofs falling apart, broken windows and doors..." (p.11)
- "abandoned infrastructure and barely functioning refineries" (p.11)
- "A boom gate and a Wilson guard" (p.12)
- "loose gravel...A high fence surrounded the camp...Rows upon rows of dark green army tents." (p.13)

An excellent basic 8-point graphic organiser concept map can be downloaded from here: <https://goalbookapp.com/toolkit/strategy/graphic-organizers>



GENRE AND WRITING STYLE

The Undesirables is a work of non-fiction, which offers an insight into Isaacs’ experiences working for the Salvation Army in the Nauru detention centre, as well as the experiences of the men living in detention, the local Nauruans, the guards and his fellow employees.

Students need to understand the purpose of Isaacs’ work - that he is trying to do more than simply offer a recount of his time on Nauru in 2012 and 2013, by telling an ‘untold story’ and giving the men he works with a voice.

Students could begin by examining how Isaacs constructs his text, to not only document his experiences in Nauru, but deepen his audience’s understanding of the realities of life on Nauru, as well as the complexities of the issue.

Classes should also explore the way this text operates as memoir. Students could examine Isaacs’ attempts to document his response to his experiences and in doing so, how he seeks to influence his audience to empathise with him and the men in detention, while condemning the Australian Government.

Jigsaw small group activity

Divide the class into small groups to investigate the different forms of writing Isaacs uses to construct *The Undesirables*.

Forms of writing	Important quotes	What role does this play in the text?
Sister Ruth Fox’s prayer (p. viii)		
Julian Burnside’s foreword (p.ix)		
Statement by Salvation Army workers (p. xx)		
DIAC [Department of Immigration and Citizenship] information sheets (p.154)		
Reports (pp. 28-9; p.38; 45; 152 & 157)		
Isaacs’ personal testimony and commentary (p.33; 114; p.192; p.195, pp. 306-307& p.332)		
The personal testimonies of the interned men (p.3; p. 25; p.37, p.97-99; p. 142)		
The personal testimonies of fellow humanitarian aid workers (p.15, 33, p.148)		
Isaacs’ letter to the men (p.111)		
Brief history of Australia’s approach to asylum seekers (pp.333-341)		
United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (pp.185-186)		
Stanford Prison Report (pp.129-131)		
Salar’s poem (p.161)		
Soccer game reports (p. 30 &		



p.150)		
Letter to DIAC from Hazaras (p.235)		
Judge John Von Doussa's report (p.311)		

2. When the class has compiled a list of quotes for each different form, invite the class to review the style of writing in each of the different forms. What conclusions can they draw about the variety of styles he uses and includes?



IMPORTANT FIGURES

Use the Harvard Visible Thinking routine: 'Perceive, Know about, Care about' from

http://www.visiblethinkingpz.org/VisibleThinking_html_files/03_ThinkingRoutines/03g_CreativityRoutines/StepInside/StepInside_Routine.html

to develop students' understanding of the different viewpoints Isaacs tries to convey in his text.

For example:

- Isaacs' viewpoint: (p.33; 114; p.192; p.195, pp.306-307 & p.332)
- The interned men: (p.25; p.37; pp.45-47; p.97-99; p. 142)
- Isaacs' fellow humanitarian aid workers: (p.15, 33, p.148)
- Wilson staff (pp.77-79)
- The DIAC (p.154)
- Julian Burnside (pp.300-301)
- The Nauruans (pp.313-314)
- The Australian media (p.269; p.285, p.293)

STRUCTURE

Small group discussion

Ask students to examine the contents page. (Ensure that they do not overlook Sister Ruth Fox's blessing - it is not listed in the contents.)

1. What do students notice about the way Isaacs has structured *The Undesirables*?
2. What are the strengths of this structuring strategy?
3. How long was each of Isaacs' rotations?
4. Is each section of his book about his time in Nauru? Which ones do not focus exclusively on Nauru? What do the different focuses bring to the text?



THEMES

Some of the main themes in *The Undesirables* are listed below, with supporting quotes, as a teacher resource.

Seeking asylum

'If you live in Afghanistan or Pakistan you wait for your death. It is something real. The Hazara people have to move to find a safer place for their family and their future. There is no other choice. If you come and see from my side, all pain. From the day you are born you are just hearing about fighting, war, killing. You are lucky to remain alive until you are sixty. When I was born I just heard the sound of guns and bomb explosions.' (p.68)

"Some of the men were homosexual. An Iranian cultural advisor told me that some of the Iranian and Iraqi asylum seekers left their countries due to homophobic oppression." (p.79)

Responding to crisis

"Many of the staff, me included, were underqualified." (p.8)

"It immediately became clear that the Nauru Regional Processing Centre was as disorganised as the pre-destination shambles had threatened." (p.13)

"We were thrown, without guidance, into a camp full of angry, depressed men." (p.24)

Freedom

"The moment a man exited those gates I could see a little bit of tension go out of his body." (p.134)

The corrupting nature of misery and despair

"Men without passports, without identities, imprisoned in a place that had no legal legitimacy. No men locked nowhere. The men were frightened. They feared they would go crazy. They feared they would go crazy. They feared they would die in Nauru, that they would be forgotten; they they would become non-people." (p.57)

"It is truly disturbing experience to hear a man admit his mental frailties." (p.92)

"That night the situation in the compound was volatile. The pressure cooker had been turned on." (p.97)

"A Wilson guard informed us that Christmas Island had two attempted suicides a day. That's what we had to expect. We were working in death factories." (p.99)

Sport as a unifying force

"The benefits of competitive sport were undeniable. It gave the men something to talk about, something to focus their minds on." (p.183)

Powerlessness and institutionalisation



“The men were losing their independence. They had no responsibility, they had no jobs.”
(p.84)

“With no women to sleep with, some of the heterosexual men chose to sleep with each other.” (p.79)

“I could see good men being broken down and there was nothing I could do to help them.”
(p.101)

The impact of war

“It must also be acknowledged that many of these men were victims of torture and trauma.”
(p.81)

Hope and hopelessness

“Avarinthan the Tamil Running Man began his morning circuits of the camp while the air was still cool.” (p.70)

“A grown man resorting to a violent and frightening tantrum to express himself.” (p.73)

“It was one success surrounded by so much failure. Moments of happiness embedded in so much sadness.” (p.183)

Human evil and human good

‘They are from Afghanistan and Pakistan but they are an ethnic group called the Hazara...They fled their country because people were trying to kill them...Because of the way they look, because of their religion.’ (p.135)

“a recreations team, an education team, a team of cultural advisors, a supplies team, and a social welfare team. Since the Salvos had taken over the canteen, complaints had stopped and the line was non-existent. New rostering for men to collect goods at the store meant no fights and few injustices.” (p.119)

Censorship

“I was given an official warning by the new management for posting the above quote on my Facebook page...The message was clear: we were to have no public political opinion whatsoever. Sit down and shut up.” (p.119)

“Finally, someone from the Salvation Army had publicly voiced support for the men, despite the threats of contractual termination and retribution the government laid at the feet of the organisation and the Salvation Army laid at the feet of the workers.” (pp.269)

Writing as a vehicle for expression and protest

“My writing made it easier for me. When people read my writing, they understood. They began asking different questions, more pertinent ones...Before I left Nauru I asked Yaqub if he would prefer for me to campaign publicly or to return to Nauru. The reality was I couldn’t do both. Whistle blowing was a breach of contract and DIAC would not allow a vocal denouncer of its human rights abuses to work in detention centres.” (p.115)



“I was lucky in a way- writing this book gave me direction and drive. It gave me something positive to work towards to help the men and to help out.” (p.318)



POSSIBLE ASSESSMENT TASKS

Unit 1 English/EAL

Area of Study 1

Reading and creating texts

Outcome 1

Produce an analytical response to *The Undesirables* (oral/multimodal or written).

For example:

1. *The Undesirables* offers a bleak and stark insight into life in the Nauru detention centre. Discuss.
2. “I knew I had made a difference in Nauru.” Discuss Isaacs’ use of personal testimony in the telling of his story.
3. How does Isaacs reveal the misery and despair he encounters while working in Nauru? Discuss.
4. “When you finish this book, take action...” Discuss the various methods Isaacs employs to provoke a response from his audience.
5. “The benefits of competitive sport were undeniable. It gave the men something to talk about, something to focus their minds on.” Discuss the role of the humanitarian aid groups on Nauru.
6. “I was sure that if I spoke out, if I shed some light on this world the government is so desperately trying to hide from us, I could make a difference.” How does the narrative voice of Isaacs convey the text’s message that Australia needs to rethink its approach to asylum seekers? Discuss.
7. ‘*The Undesirables* is not only about despair; it is also about shared humanity and connection’. To what extent do you agree?
8. How does Isaacs transport the reader into the world of the text? Discuss.
9. How is the audience encouraged to share Isaacs’ view that, “This story will only be over when Australia treats all asylum seekers with the dignity any human being deserves”.

Outcome 1

Produce a creative response to *The Undesirables* (oral/multimodal or written).

1. Transform a part of *The Undesirables* into a new form.
2. Rewrite an existing scene from another individual’s perspective.

Key events such as the July riots, detailed in chapter 64 or the court case in chapter 61 offer plenty of scope for a creative response. The response of the Salvos and the DIAC to Isaacs’ decision to “make a statement” also has great potential. (Chapters 58 & 59.) Chapter 60 also offers students an opportunity to examine the point of view of Australian political parties during election time.



Area of Study 2

Analysing and presenting argument

Outcome 2

Create a text intended to position an audience (oral/multimodal or written).

Watch the following video from ABC Splash:

<http://splash.abc.net.au/newsandarticles/blog/-/b/2328989/student-voices-shape-australian-society-through-youth-parliament>

Then, research Australia's current policies on asylum seekers, remembering that *The Undesirables* is set in 2012 and 2013. What new perspectives could you bring to the issue? Pretend you are addressing the youth parliament, offering your point of view on Australia's current policies. Research databases like EBSCOhost and Australia (Explora) and Australian/New Zealand Points of View will prove invaluable.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THESE NOTES

Jill Fitzsimons is the English Learning Leader at Whitefriars College.