

Waltzing with Jack Dancer

A slow dance with cancer

Poems by Geoff Goodfellow

Story by Grace Goodfellow

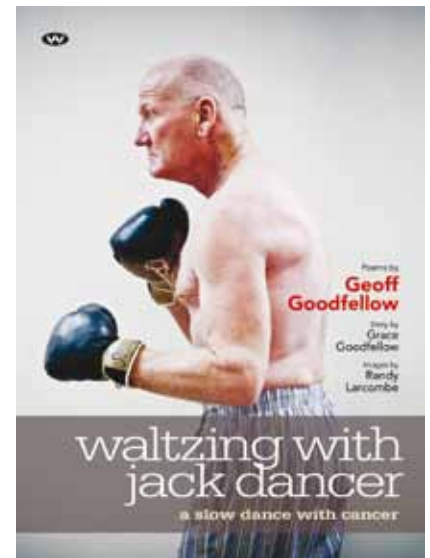
Images by Randy Larcombe

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Study guide by Barbara James

Introduction

This guide complements the study of *Waltzing with Jack Dancer* by Geoff Goodfellow for Senior Secondary, VET and Adult students.

Waltzing with Jack Dancer is a powerful record in poetry, photos and prose of one man's journey with cancer. The book allows us inside – the ward, the MRI scanner, the operating theatre; and into the feelings that this alien world creates. Geoff's book documents a fight between frailty and strength, written by a man who is always up for a fight. Grace Goodfellow's remarkable prose piece, '**The C Word**' shows it's not just the person who has cancer who feels its effects.

The guide offers a range of activities and information to help students form a deeper understanding of some of the issues raised and techniques used in the selection of poems.

The suggestions and model offered can be used as springboards to student writing.

7 poems have been chosen to work with:

- 'Blue Sky Mornings'
- 'The Calling'
- 'The Seventh Doctor'
- 'Maybe'
- 'Night Moves'
- 'Reversing'
- 'An Uncertain Future'

As well as: 'The C Word' by Grace Goodfellow



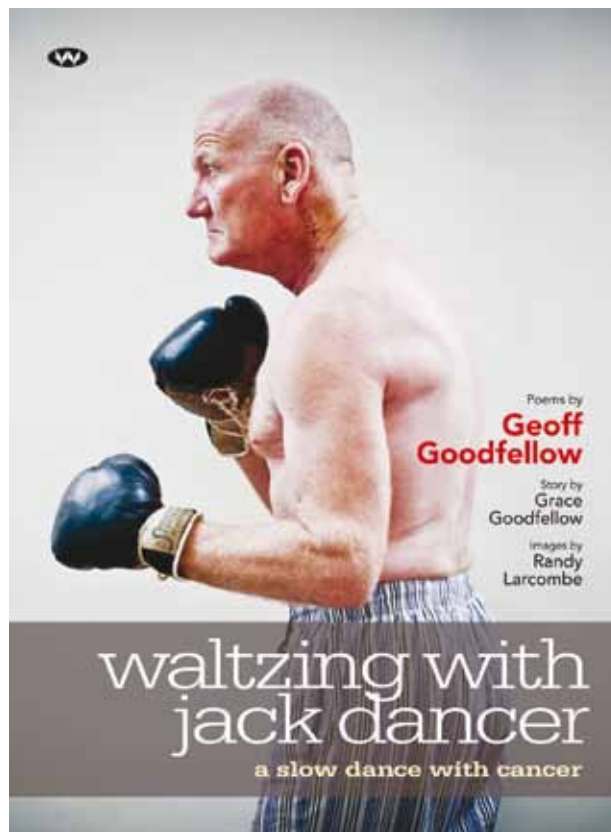
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Before we start let's have a look at the cover and title of the book.

The cover image, like the book, is entitled *Waltzing with Jack Dancer* and was taken on Geoff's return home from hospital after having a major neck dissection. This image is one of the many striking, intimate and at times confronting photographs taken by Randy Larcombe to document Geoff's cancer journey. This image was short-listed for the Moran Portrait prize for photography in 2009. It shows Geoff in a boxer's 'dancing stance'; gloves up, ready to do battle even though still in his post-op pyjamas. Here then is the symbolic image for the whole book. The dance metaphor is carried over into the title. The boxer's sprightly dance has become a waltz, a slow, circular, intimate dance much like the treatment regime Geoff finds himself in. Geoff has described this since as, 'turning in circles'. Jack Dancer is of course Australian rhyming slang for cancer but the choice here uses both personification and a play on the 'dance' image to complete this unsettling image. Check out the glare in his eyes and the set of his face. Do you think they are consistent with that of someone who is beaten? How would you read this photograph?



Blue Sky Mornings

This poem first published in *Wet Ink* tells of Geoff's long association with cigarette smoking and with other potential cancer risks. It begins with the rather disturbing image of a little five year old boy blowing smoke rings into *perfect blue sky mornings*,* the innocence of the boy mirroring the pristine morning air, both made dirty by cigarette smoke.

Geoff then describes with great fondness his enthusiasm for his first job at this tender age with *Lennie Sugars the milky*, cigarettes a part of the scene even then,

& i'd butt my smoke into
the red clay soil & bolt out
to meet him

Note the technique of alliteration used here in the repetition of the *b* sound in *butt* and *bolt*.

The boy grows into adulthood surrounded by cancer risks in his work environment, the building site.

It is not hard to imagine the scene and the smell because of the way the words are chosen and assembled.

The technique of alliteration is used here to help convey the large number of these products Geoff has been in contact with.

& i'd pick up solvents & sealants
& stains & paints & fluxes
& fluids with peculiar smells

The skin cancer risk is always present too:

days on building sites in blinding sun
with no UV protection

A great deal of emphasis is placed on the sense of hearing in this poem. It brings us into this little boy's world, making it easier for us to imagine it:

& walking up & down
the white quartz driveway

we can almost hear the crunch of gravel underfoot and the annoying sharp bang of the fly screen door,

& being careful not to let the
screen door slap as i'd creep

and there's more:

looking up at the apricots
at the end of the driveway —
& sometimes hearing them fall

What sound would they make; a plop, thud or splat?

Here is the sound of the milky, a sound long gone from our streets,

the jingle of empty bottles
& the clip-clop of hooves

hearing the clink of empties
from the back of the cart as the
horse worked his way towards
Lennie's low whistle

The poem is rich with the use of colour too. This is another technique used by Geoff to make the scene come alive to the reader.

There are many examples in the poem, here is one:

the red soft pack he'd left on
the front bench seat

How many can you find? Make a list.

The time setting is created by a studied choice of clues, for example *dad's cream FX Holden*. You could easily Google this image and see the car. Can you find more examples of creating time clues?

This poem, like many of Geoff Goodfellow's is a narrative poem, it tells a story but it asks questions too.

The end of 'Blue Sky Mornings' is a frustrated plea for answers typical of someone who has recently been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness:

& yet no one can tell me with any
authority
just how i got cancer.

Activities

If you are/were a smoker, how old were you when you had your first 'drag'? Do you remember it? If so, write about it. Ask your parent or someone you know older than you to tell you about their experience.

Have you stopped smoking? Why/why not? Was it difficult? Do you want to give up but can't? What methods have you tried? Have you made a decision to never start? Write about/share your experiences.

What is your opinion of anti-smoking campaigns e.g. plain packaging, graphic images on cigarette packets, raising prices of cigarettes, etc. Do they work? Why/Why not? Conduct a survey in your group or family to help you find out.

Some questions

What are some outward signs of a heavy smoker?

How many cigarettes has Geoff smoked since he started? Ask yourself the same question.

What is/was a 'milky'?

Have you been touched by cancer; someone you know, a family member or maybe even yourself?

If you feel comfortable you might like to write about it; your thoughts, observations, questions, frustrations, etc. It could be in the form of a story, poem, diary, drama script, diary, letter/email/blog etc.

You might choose to plan a fundraiser event for head and neck cancer (or whichever type you wish). Make sure you've done your research, keep a journal of the planning, write the event up as a report in school magazine, get plenty of feedback. Be creative!

*interesting note: there is a brand of cigarette called Winfield Sky Blue.

The Calling

This poem begins with a telling choice of words:

When i was tipped out
of the ward to go home

The image here is of something of little value being 'disposed of' with Geoff having been given no clear idea as to how he should lead his daily life after the cancer diagnosis.

Having followed a rigorous exercise program for the last ten years, Geoff is concerned about whether he will be able to keep this going and indeed if that would be advisable. He wants to know his 'boundaries'.

Fear causes his imagination to run wild as he imagines:

i thought about the little
cancer cells eating away at my
decayed throat

And whether a:

raised heart rate would pump
those little critters right through
my body
& scatter cancers everywhere

With this level of anxiety Geoff still embarks on his first attempt in the ocean. He decides not to risk a swim, not because of the fear of sharks:

but i felt i was being circled
by something far more sinister

Geoff's use of imagery in this section of the poem is both sustained and intense.

Geoff decides to wade the shoreline instead, determined to maintain his exercise regime as best he can, all the while speaking to the cancer; it is a living thing after all, a part of him.

He tells it,

i'm going to fight you every inch
of the way
you won't beat me

It is as though he is trying to psych out his opponent like in a boxing match as well as psyching himself up for the fight.

Finally there comes one of Geoff's most moving, powerful images. He describes how, surrounded by the ocean he keeps calling to the cancer,

i'm here
i'm here
i'm here.

These words symbolize his defiance, daring and determination. He is daring the cancer to come and claim him but he is also making the life-affirming statement 'I'm here, I'm alive!'

The image with the poem expresses so much. We see Geoff venturing timidly into the ocean with his personal trainer and friend Palle Muus of Balance Gym in North Adelaide.

Immediately one is struck by the contrast in size between the two men. But it is more than that. Palle's arm gently guiding, Geoff's left hand tense, betraying his anxiety, stance hesitant, back slightly stooped. The ocean before them is calm but vast, just like Geoff's challenge.

You can almost hear him calling to the cancer.

Can you see anything else in this photo?



The Seventh Doctor

Dr Guy Rees, Geoff's surgeon, known as 'the seventh doctor', suggested to Geoff on the operating table that he should write about his experiences, pointing out the failings in the health system especially for public patients. Dr Rees encouraged Geoff to document the poor treatment he had received from some doctors who had failed to treat him with common courtesy and dignity.

This poem tells of the 'run-around' patients often get in the public health system. Geoff goes from one doctor to the next before he is satisfied with the level of care he receives, both medical and interpersonal. We follow Geoff from his GP and the original misdiagnosis and inappropriate drug treatment through to the irony of being told in Emergency that the stretchers are reserved for SICK people, when he is too sick to even sit upright. After this he is advised to go back and see the GP who has misdiagnosed him twice! Finally, not surprisingly, Geoff loses his cool and insists on receiving an examination by the doctor in the public hospital.

After eventually having a CT scan he is told to prepare for 'the big C'. There follows in the poem some plays on this term which is slang for cancer, but which also has another often offensive connotation. Geoff suggests that two of the doctors who had treated him poorly may indeed qualify for the term.

We see this expression used again in Geoff's daughter Grace's story 'The C Word' later in the book.

The technique of sarcasm is employed in the next section of the poem to convey his frustration at how long he has to wait to be operated on:

but i'll go outside every hour
& check the roof for homing pigeons
so feel free to send your instructions
by carrier pigeon

This is followed by an exact recount of what Geoff said when he was accused by a doctor of 'being confused' and therefore able to be brushed off. He goes into quite some detail to prove that he indeed had perfect recall of the events surrounding his examination. Here Geoff uses the technique of allowing us to hear his voice, lengthy and precise and the doctor's replies, short and possibly humbled.

The power dynamic in the doctor-patient relationship has changed from:

the sixth doctor suggested we end the call

To:

& we both hung up

Using the power of language Geoff has redressed the balance of power between the doctor and patient.

We come to the day of the initial biopsy to determine the extent of the cancer and Geoff describes the surgeon and his team:

they looked like concrete finishers
on a building site

as they wore blue overalls and white gumboots; an almost comical simile as the two environments are so far apart.

The surgeon, 'the seventh doctor' from the poem's title is:

a decent bloke who showed me
decency & got it in return

We then follow Geoff as he battles a persistent infection until finally he is wheeled into the operating theatre for his neck dissection. The resulting wound is graphically described with the help of similes:

they said the wound looked like i'd
been carved up with a broken flagon
they said a bottle would have been
far too small they said it looked scary —

it was a cut as big as a baling hook
& with its thirty metal staples
it looked almost as shiny & nearly as
dangerous

The poem ends with the surgeon warning Geoff to try to put some weight on before the course of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Geoff reflects, using a play on words, that:

he'd performed his surgery on Holy Thursday
20th March 2008
& with the neck muscle removed he'd
left a hole

And concludes with:

it was a good Friday to get that news
i lay in bed eating Easter eggs —
silver paper & cellophane
surrounding me
chocolate sliding down my throat.

'Black humour' is used by people in difficult circumstances to lighten the mood, to make their situation more bearable. Geoff uses this technique repeatedly in this poem as the subject matter is so bleak. How many examples can you find? One is below:

i asked her to be careful said i
didn't have a big mouth
(although i'm sure some doctors
[& others] would dispute that)

Activities

Find out about the public health system and the private health system. What are some of the differences? Prepare a report.

How many doctors did Geoff see in total?

Write in your own words what happened when Geoff went to see each of the doctors.

What is the Ambulance Fund? Explain what happens when someone has to travel in an ambulance.

Should Geoff have driven his car to the hospital when he first became sick? Why did he?

Explain the line 'thinking of the thickness of a coat of paint'.

From Geoff's appearance and behavior in Emergency, what did they assume was wrong with him?

Geoff thinks that two of the doctors he has met 'may be the big C'. What does he mean? Who are they?

Why does Geoff mention that the seventh doctor, the surgeon, was:

back at my bedside on Good Friday
morning away from his own four kids

What do these lines tell you about this doctor?

Geoff referred to all of the doctors by numbers – because he felt that he had been treated in such an impersonal way by many of those doctors. With the exception of doctors three, seven, eight and 14 Geoff considered he had been treated very shabbily. Doctor six for instance suggested that Geoff should go 'private' if he wanted to call the tune. He tried to humiliate Geoff rather than show any humility or decency or sense of concern. What do you expect from your doctor? Have a look at the comments on the back cover of the book by the seventh doctor, Dr Guy Rees.

Here is a poem I wrote as a model. I tried to use Geoff's style and tone and I borrowed some techniques too. I received a challenging diagnosis some years ago. My poem is about that experience.

A Testing Time

It began with a twitch
in my right
 shoulder
that wouldn't
 go away
i drove my car into a wall too
that made me
worried

my GP
a man who had won
my trust said
it could be a brain tumour
you need tests
you need to see a neurologist
i became more
worried

my neurologist kind gentle young
& puzzled
sent me off for
the Test Trio --
 Lumbar Puncture
 MRI
 &
 VEP

i sat
afraid to know...
the Test Trio
my neurologist
& my GP
all in agreement

it's MS
and my world fell apart.

I have used many of Geoff's techniques to hopefully encourage you to write too!

For example, the use of lower case, ampersand (&), first word beginning with a capital, last word followed by a full stop. Lines are indented as a form of punctuation, ellipsis (...) indicates a long pause, capital letters to indicate important words.

What else can you find?

Have a go, try to write a poem yourself!

Maybe

Watch Geoff read the poem [‘Maybe’](#).

This poem focuses on cigarette advertising and its effects over the years.

The setting is not the American West as in the iconic Marlboro Man advertisements of the 50’s through to the 90’s but the Head and Neck Ward of a major Australian city hospital.

We see old Marlboro Men lined up in their beds having just had neck surgery as a result of falling victim to the mass appeal of cigarette advertising campaigns.

Fortunately this kind of advertising was stamped out by the Australian Government over 20 years ago.

The irony here is grim and the humour sarcastic, Geoff often trades off word play in his writing.

on Alpine white beds
now that’s Kool

These are the names of menthol flavoured cigarettes, controversial because they were said to encourage young people, especially women, to take up smoking. They were marketed to ‘cool the throat’, hence the name ‘Kool’. It was inferred by the advertising campaign that you were ‘cool’ if you smoked this brand. It is not just poets who use word play.

Not many cool throats in this ward.

Geoff uses Aussie slang when he says:

& i’ll give you the Drum

This is the Aussie tip-off, the honest truth. Of course it is a play on words; Drum being the well-known brand of hand-rolling tobacco.

Another very Australian word play is the name ‘Blue’ given to a redhead:

(geez that looks like Blue
in bed seven
hasn’t he lost some weight)

In a powerful evocative image Geoff imagines that the ‘Winfield Reds’ are lined up on one side of the ward and the ‘Winfield Blues’ on the other as though taking part in some deadly game. The colour of the pack represents the ‘strength’ of the cigarette; Red 16 mg of tar, Blue 12 mg, Sky Blue 6 mg, and so on. Like rival footy team fans or Holden vs. Ford enthusiasts, life-long smokers identify with their chosen brand.

It is widely known that advertising companies create an image in order to sell a product. Perhaps as well-known as the ‘Marlboro Man’, at least in Australia, is the image of the rugged ‘ocker’ made popular by Paul Hogan to advertise Winfield cigarettes. First appearing in the 1970’s, the advertisements which targeted working men and women helped Winfield become the highest selling cigarettes in Australia and subsequently helped launch Hogan’s career as the ‘face of Australia’.

Paul Hogan's character would always begin the ad with something humorous happening to him after which he would drawl the words 'Anyhow ... have a Winfield' and then light up. This phrase became a catch-cry on building sites, in factories and pubs around the nation. In the poem Geoff asks the question:

& where is Paul Hogan
when we really need a laugh

The last few lines of the poem change in tone from grim humour to uncertainty, emphasized by the repetition of the word 'maybe'. Lying in their hospital beds recovering from throat surgery, looking ahead to possible treatments, the old men are scared:

maybe it'll hurt too much

The bravado has gone and the reality set in:

maybe there's nothing much
to laugh at anymore

maybe now the laugh's
on us.

Geoff has neatly made the smoker into the joke with his summing up.

Activities

The close-up photo of Geoff with his neck newly stapled is a perfect image to accompany this poem. It expresses pride, determination and strength and yet there is a hint of anxiety, even fear around the eyes.

What do you see in this photo? Analyze it, write about it.

Research one of these topics:

- Cigarette advertising, its history and methods.
- The history of smoking tobacco, when and where did it originate.
- The health risks associated with smoking.
- Smoking laws in various countries, which country has the highest incidence of smoking.
- Third World countries are now being targeted by cigarette companies. Why?

Present your findings to these questions as an oral presentation supported by a slideshow/powerpoint.



Find out the incidence of head/neck cancer (throat, tongue, lip etc.) and lung cancer in women. Compare this to men. What do these findings suggest?

Research flavoured cigarettes, e.g. menthol. What is the appeal? What are the laws about their use/sale?

Why do people smoke/take drugs/drink alcohol?

This is a huge topic and there are many reasons.

Write down your own thoughts. Perhaps brainstorm in your group. Make a list then do some research. Here are some websites to help you:

www.quitsa.org.au

www.dassa.sa.gov.au

Find out if it's ok first then ask your friends and/or family to share their thoughts with you.

What are the laws in Australia today relating to cigarette and alcohol advertising?

When did they change?

Find out about the laws in other countries.

What follows are two old smoking ads, one from the 30s the other from the 50s. Write a response to each of them.

What techniques are being used?



Night Moves

Geoff quickly establishes in this poem that he is only halfway through the cancer treatment, *the chemo and the radio*, he can't eat and has to be fed by means of a tube which goes up his nose and through to his stomach – AND – he has a temperature, when he finds himself back in hospital.

Immediately the mood is set; he is frustrated, not able to take much more aggravation. This technique is often used in Geoff's poetry; he 'sets the stage' often using only a few well-chosen words or lines, to help the reader get to the main point of the poem.

One reason why Geoff is a successful performance poet is because his poems contain the voices of the characters who inhabit them. We can hear the old man opposite Geoff as he calls out in the night,

Josephine

Josephine

Josephine

as though he is at home calling perhaps for his wife- such a sad, powerful image.

And the Croatian man with dementia who is yelling at the nurses:

& he went on

& on

& on

until Geoff cracks, his patience gone we get to hear HIS soft, yet menacing voice. At this point in time he'd had his voice box removed on the left side and was 'Whispering Geoff'. (Some months later he had a synthetic voice box implanted.)

if he keeps this up

i'll suffocate him with a pillow

After a comment like that (even if in jest) it is no surprise that Geoff is moved the next morning to a private room!

The choice of title for this poem is interesting. It brings to mind a well-known song by Bob Seger about young people growing up in the 60's 'trying to lose the awkward teenage blues' through engaging in 'night moves' or summertime flings. Along with the other 'old men' in the cancer ward, Geoff would have been a teenager at this time. This is a poignant reminder about the passing of time and the fragility of health.

Activities

Have you ever had to go to hospital for an overnight stay or longer? Write about your experience, with nursing staff, doctors, other patients, visitors. Try to describe the atmosphere as well as your feelings and physical surroundings.

If you have only visited someone write about that.

Please be creative in your choice of form; poem, story, play, artwork.

Reversing

This poem, first published in *The Age* shows how having cancer has changed Geoff, what used to upset him no longer does. Many people who have faced a serious health scare have had similar experiences. They approach their lives in a new way, with the attitude ‘Don’t take life so seriously’, ‘Don’t sweat the small stuff’.

The title itself refers to the fact that Geoff has reversed many of his former ways of dealing with life’s situations. Before the cancer Geoff might have got out of his car and started a ‘blue’ with the driver. Now he is happy to laugh it off and go on his way reflecting that the young bloke with the *tousled & spiky* hair was *right of course* when he told Geoff to *chill out dude*. He has learnt there are bigger and more important things in life.

The choice of the word ‘growled’ is an interesting one. Before the cancer, Geoff would have YELLED to the driver in the No Parking zone because that was Geoff; quick-tempered and feisty, used to getting his way. Now he ‘growls’ like a belligerent, wounded bear partly because he is unable to YELL since his surgery but also because he has mellowed and doesn’t see the point.

One of Geoff’s most often used techniques is his rather unusual punctuation and placement of words in the lines of the poems. This is done to replicate the spoken word, to assist the reader when performing the poems and for emphasis. The poem is written as a script for the voice.

This technique allows the reader to imagine the scene, almost like stage directions for an actor.

For example the placing of the word *slowly* is intended to slow the poem down so as to emphasize the last image.

i set the car into drive
took a left turn slowly –
& drove down the road laughing

he was right
of course.

Activities

They say cancer is caused by stress and that you should try to remove stressors from your life.

Many people believe this. What do you think?

Do some research to find out what other people think; the medical profession, people who have recovered from cancer, people who are in treatment, friends and family members.

The Cancer Council of NSW suggests that ‘stress could have indirect links because people who are under stress may do things that increase their risk of cancer’ – www.cancercouncil.com.au/editorial.

What might some of these things be?

Often you hear the term ‘complementary medicine’. Find out what this term means.

What is the difference between this and ‘alternative treatments’?

Is leading a healthy lifestyle, eating good food, meditating etc. useful in the treatment of cancer?

See what you can find out about this topic.

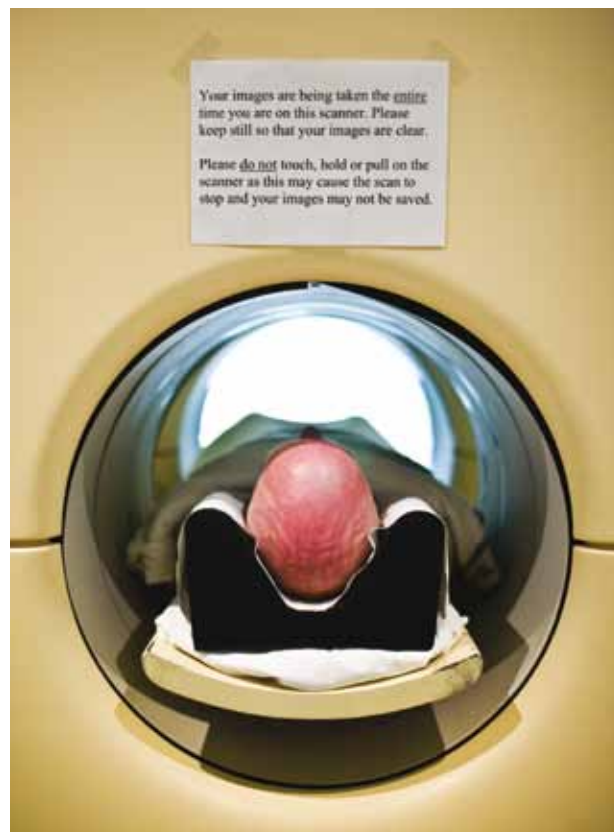
This image shows Geoff in the process of having an MRI scan.

MRI or Magnetic Resonance Imaging uses a magnetic field and radio waves but no radiation to take pictures of the body's interior. It is especially helpful for exploring soft tissue such as organs or muscles.

The other scan that you may hear about is called a CAT Scan or CT (Computerised Tomography) Scan. The machine takes pictures of lots of cross-sections of the inside of your body using x-rays and a computer. It is often used to pinpoint the exact location of a tumour that is about to be subjected to radiotherapy.

Activities

Have you ever had to have one of these scans? What was it like?



An Uncertain Future

Watch Geoff perform [‘An Uncertain Future’](#).

This reflective poem was selected by John Tranter for *The Best Australian Poems 2011*. It is a good example of the ‘snapshot technique’ used often to great effect by Geoff Goodfellow. Details are meticulously noted and employed to help tell the story.

All the action happens during a change in the traffic lights. The poem resembles a quick scene in a movie, indeed the poem reads like a voiceover.

In the first part of the poem Geoff describes how while waiting for the lights to change, he sees a young woman cross the road in front of his car. Geoff’s initial description makes you think he is attracted to her:

her arms & legs were heavily
tanned & she wore strappy sandals

But then the mood changes:

her hair was bottle blonde --
& as she crossed in front of me
blowing out a stream of blue
cigarette smoke
i noticed her black roots
complemented her chipped & broken
front teeth

Geoff makes further observations; he notices that not only is she smoking but that she is at least seven months pregnant. She is damaging herself and her unborn child.

Geoff has also told us that he is sitting in his car opposite the Adelaide Magistrates Court. So where is this woman headed? Or Geoff, for that matter?

Poetry works best when it is understated. Geoff has really understated the situation of this woman. But he has given a subtle understated hint to those readers/listeners who have an intimate knowledge of drug users. Heroin and Methamphetamine users invariably end up with black stumps for teeth because of the dry mouth condition associated with hard drug use.

The lights change, everyone in the scene goes on with their lives while Geoff is left to reflect on what that means for each of them. In light of his recent experience with cancer (most probably caused by smoking) you can imagine the questions in his head, what does the future mean for them all?

What future does the young woman have? Will she engage in a lifetime of smoking as she is obviously a committed smoker since she is smoking during her pregnancy? Has she stopped using hard drugs?

What will this mean to her unborn child and to the child/future children growing up in a smoker’s home?

Finally Geoff wonders about *his* uncertain future. Will the cancer come back, will he have to undergo more treatment?

He moves off *slowly*, obviously affected by these questions, leaving them for *us* to ponder.

Activities

Explain *bottle blonde* and *black roots*.

Notice the use of colour again in this poem to make the picture clearer.

How many examples can you find?

Research the risks of smoking in pregnancy, including the effects of passive smoking.

Write up your findings in a report or present as an oral/PowerPoint.

Images of the radiotherapy mask page 89

What is radiotherapy?

Do some research: www.cancercouncil.com.au can help.

What are the side effects of radiotherapy?

How effective is it?

Page 89

What is your response to this image?

When is a mask like this used?

Why is the mask necessary?

What is the mask made of?

Page 74

You can see the same mask hanging on the wall next to Geoff's boxing gloves. This juxtaposition of objects is symbolic. Explain.

If you look carefully you will see 'the real Geoff' silhouetted just below. Explain what you think this photograph means.

Pages 54 and 58

On these pages the mask can be seen again, this time Geoff is wearing the mask while undergoing the radiation treatment. You can clearly see the feeding tube inserted into his right nostril. Ever present is the machine which is designed to kill the cancer cells or at least injure them so they cannot multiply. Write down your response to these images.

Page 106

This image is of a treatment console at the Royal Adelaide Hospital. You can see the nurses monitoring Geoff undergoing his treatment.

Pages 54 and 55

This double page view is of a linear accelerator. This is the machine which produces the radiation treatment.



The C Word

Geoff's daughter, Grace Goodfellow, wrote this novella partly as a Christmas gift to her dad but also as a gift to herself, after all, the two Goodfellows survived the journey together.

Let's start with the title, the images and the dedication.

We have come across this use of *the C word* used as a slang term to describe cancer before in this collection. Geoff used it in 'The Seventh Doctor'.

Like *cancer*, the *C word* is a taboo word, one that people are not comfortable hearing or talking about.

But Grace proceeds to do just that; by telling her story, she is exposing some of the thoughts and feelings of those who go through the cancer journey alongside the person with the disease.

Using a beautiful metaphor, Grace expresses the almost overwhelming challenge in the dedication to her friend Elli:

Sadness is the ocean and you are teaching me how to swim.

The image on page 90 symbolizes Grace through the tough times of the journey; alone, head and eyes downcast, looking away from the camera, in school uniform, looking as though she has more on her mind than her appearance. If we compare this with the image of Grace on page 127 we can see that her dad is now with her, she is smiling broadly, dressed in smart clothes, facing the camera and arms folded in a gesture of confidence.



Throughout the book we have seen just how much meaning can come from a few well-chosen words as in a poem or story and from a well-crafted image.

Grace begins the story like a fairytale, retelling one of her father's often repeated lines through her early childhood when he would amuse her with his stories.

Once upon a time, when the birds chewed lime, and the monkeys chewed tobacco – he was okay.

We soon learn it is no fairy tale but very much a reality.

After establishing with us her relationship with her father as happy, carefree and loving, Grace foreshadows what is to come by placing the lines:

Everything was perfect.

and

This year – this year will be beautiful.



Grace used these short but telling statements on their own for emphasis. This is a technique that Geoff often uses in his poetry.

Grace then documents HER story, the ups, the downs, the hopes and fears, but above all, the truth about what it was like for her as the daughter of a cancer sufferer.

When Grace first started to write and publish as an adolescent she wrote poetry. As a teenager she moved to writing short prose pieces but with a very poetic approach. Have a good look at how Grace has created a style for her prose writing which uses elements of conventional prose, verse novels, poetry and lists which she blends seamlessly to form a distinct style. Grace reads widely and has been influenced by writers like Briget Lowry, Markus Zusac, Margaret Wild, and of course, her own dad. Who are your influences?

Activities

What is your favourite part of Grace's story? Why?

Grace uses her father's voice often throughout the story. Give two examples.

What do you think is going on in the *Tell me about the Seven Stages of Grief* section? (refer page 98)

What is glandular fever?

What is chronic fatigue syndrome?

Prepare a report.

The last line in Grace's story makes a great ending. Comment.