

# Teaching Notes for Tommy Bell Bushranger Boy #5 – Gang of Thieves

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## Summary

Tommy Bell is on school camp at Young, where the goldfields were in colonial times. Tommy is enjoying camp with his friends Francis and Martin, except that the camp leader, Mr Porter, picks on the boys. When they are out hiking, Mr Porter notices that Tommy is not wearing his hat and slams it down onto his head. The trouble is that the hat is Tommy's magical cabbage-tree hat, and wearing it sends him back to gold rush days.

Tommy finds himself in the company of Ben Hall, a bushranger he met in an earlier adventure. He has mixed feelings about Ben Hall. Ben was part of a gang that humiliated him, but afterwards Ben was kind and looked after him. Tommy feels that Ben is misguided rather than 'bad', and that he would benefit from his good influence. He decides to stick with Ben even though some of Ben's friends are violent thugs who cannot be trusted.

The narrative travels forwards and backwards in time as Tommy has several encounters with Ben Hall and his gang. He is caught up in some of their crimes and disapproves of their actions, but also has some sympathy for Ben as he witnesses the abuse of police power.

Once again, Tommy faces a moral dilemma and emotional conflict as he befriends Ben Hall and is sorry for him but feels that his actions are wrong. This raises for young readers the long-time question about whether Australian bushrangers take their place in history as heroes, villains or victims of circumstance.

*Gang of thieves* is the fifth book in the 'Tommy Bell, Bushranger Boy' series and is an excellent resource as a stand-alone fiction novel for classroom units or to be enjoyed by readers as part of the ongoing series.

## From the Author

I'm lucky that my favourite pastimes – reading and writing and learning about history – are also important parts of my job. I'm an author but I'm also a school librarian (which means I spend my days surrounded by books) and a school archivist – which means I also spend my days sorting, cataloguing and preserving old things, and finding out all the stories behind them. That's what history is, really: stories. Some of the stories we read are true and some are not, but all of them can be fascinating.

My interest in Australian history led me to write my true stories about the bushrangers in the *Australian Bushranger* series. In turn, these true stories led to the not-so-true stories about Tommy Bell, an ordinary boy who goes back in time to have extraordinary adventures with the colourful criminals of our past.

The *Tommy Bell, bushranger boy* series combines fact with fiction. The books contain true settings and events and some real people, but the main characters – Tommy and his friends – are characters that I made up. This is what we call *historical fiction*. I've tried to keep the history part as accurate as possible, and to help you to separate the fact from the fiction, I've included some historical notes at the end.

A final note: I owe my love of reading to many authors who wrote the wonderful books that brought me so much joy in my childhood. As a child I especially loved adventure stories, so it has been a thrill to have had the chance to write some adventure stories of my own. I've dedicated each book in my *Tommy Bell* series to characters in books that I enjoyed as a child. Can you work out who those characters are? Maybe your teacher or librarian or parents can help you to find the books they came from!

## Emerging themes and issues

- Australian bushrangers – heroes or villains?
- Time travel
- The Gold Rush
- Friendships
- Moral dilemmas and the complexity of human behaviour
- Comparison of rural communities in the past and present
- The importance of local knowledge in a region's history
- Criminal behaviour
- Survival
- Adventure
- Police
- Bullying
- Abuse of power

## Curriculum Links

### **Australian Curriculum English Year 3**

Draw connections between personal experiences and the worlds of texts, and share responses with others ([ACELT1596 - Scootle](#))

Discuss how language is used to describe the settings in texts, and explore how the settings shape the events and influence the mood of the narrative ([ACELT1599 - Scootle](#))

Identify the point of view in a text and suggest alternative points of view ([ACELY1675 - Scootle](#))

Discuss the nature and effects of some language devices used to enhance meaning and shape the reader's reaction, including rhythm and onomatopoeia in poetry and prose ([ACELT1600 - Scootle](#))

Create imaginative texts based on characters, settings and events from students' own and other cultures using visual features, for example perspective, distance and angle ([ACELT1601 - Scootle](#))

Use comprehension strategies to build literal and inferred meaning and begin to evaluate texts by drawing on a growing knowledge of context, text structures and language features ([ACELY1680 - Scootle](#))

### **Australian Curriculum English Year 4**

Discuss literary experiences with others, sharing responses and expressing a point of view ([ACELT1603](#))

Discuss how authors and illustrators make stories exciting, moving and absorbing and hold readers' interest by using various techniques, for example character development and plot tension ([ACELT1605](#))

Recognise how quotation marks are used in texts to signal dialogue, titles and quoted (direct) speech ([ACELA1492](#))

Understand, interpret and experiment with a range of devices and deliberate word play in poetry and other literary texts, for example nonsense words, spoonerisms, neologisms and puns ([ACELT1606](#))

Create literary texts that explore students' own experiences and imagining ([ACELT1607](#))

Use comprehension strategies to build literal and inferred meaning to expand content knowledge, integrating and linking ideas and analysing and evaluating texts ([ACELY1692](#))

## Australian Curriculum English Year 5

Understand that patterns of language interaction vary across social contexts and types of texts and that they help to signal social roles and relationships ([ACELA1501](#))

Identify aspects of literary texts that convey details or information about particular social, cultural and historical contexts ([ACELT1608](#))

Understand how the grammatical category of possessives is signalled through apostrophes and how to use apostrophes with common and proper nouns ([ACELA1506](#))

Investigate how the organisation of texts into chapters, headings, subheadings, home pages and sub-pages for online texts and according to chronology or topic can be used to predict content and assist navigation ([ACELA1797](#))

Recognise that ideas in literary texts can be conveyed from different viewpoints, which can lead to different kinds of interpretations and responses ([ACELT1610](#))

Create literary texts that experiment with structures, ideas and stylistic features of selected authors ([ACELT1798](#))

Identify and explain characteristic text structures and language features used in imaginative, informative and persuasive texts to meet the purpose of the text ([ACELY1701](#)).

Use a range of software including word processing programs with fluency to construct, edit and publish written text, and select, edit and place visual, print and audio elements ([ACELY1707](#))

## Australian Curriculum Year 6 English

Understand how authors often innovate on text structures and play with language features to achieve particular aesthetic, humorous and persuasive purposes and effects ([ACELA1518](#))

Make connections between students' own experiences and those of characters and events represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts ([ACELT1613](#))

Identify the relationship between words, sounds, imagery and language patterns in narratives and poetry such as ballads, limericks and free verse ([ACELT1617](#))

Participate in and contribute to discussions, clarifying and interrogating ideas, developing and supporting arguments, sharing and evaluating information, experiences and opinions ([ACELY1709](#))

Analyse how text structures and language features work together to meet the purpose of a text ([ACELY1711](#))

Select, navigate and read texts for a range of purposes, applying appropriate text processing strategies and interpreting structural features, for example table of contents, glossary, chapters, headings and subheadings([ACELY1712](#))

### Suggested Pre-Reading Activities

- Discussion: If you could travel back in time and visit a certain place or event, where might you like to go? What might you choose to see or do? What might be the same? What might be different?
- View maps and photographs (from the past and present) of the settings.
- Identify the period of Australian history in which bushrangers were prevalent. Show or locate on a timeline. Discuss other events which were occurring in Australia's history at that time.
- Show students the cover of the novel and read the blurb to them. Ask them to write down their predictions of what might happen to Tommy throughout the story.
- After showing students the cover of the book and reading the blurb to them, brainstorm things students would like to learn questions they have about the Gold Rush era.

### Suggested During Reading activities

- As the students progress through the story, create a story map which outlines the generic features of the novel (Introduction, conflict, resolution, further action, conclusion).
- As more about Ben Hall is revealed as the story unfolds, research online to see if any of the settings or events in the story happened in real life (refer to Jane Smith's 'Australian Bushrangers' series book, *Ben Hall*).
- Create a word wall, including unknown words and words relating to the era in which Ben Hall lived.
- Choose words from within the text to include in spelling lists.
- Begin a character web showing the characters linked to Ben Hall and his story. Add to it as characters are introduced throughout the story.
- Build a profile for each character throughout the book. Include descriptive words found in the text and personal inferences.

### Suggested Post Reading Activities

- Write a letter to author and historian Jane Smith asking further questions about Ben Hall or Australian bushrangers in general.
- Create and film a "book talk" reviewing the book.
- Produce a new book cover and blurb for the story.
- Compile a book review, outlining details of the storyline, recommended readers, etc.
- Create an advertising poster which could be displayed in a bookstore which would persuade readers to purchase the book.
- Imagine you are Ben Hall or Tommy Bell. Write a series of diary entries based on events in the book.
- Write a letter from Ben Hall to his girlfriend.

## Chapter Summaries and Comprehension Questions

### Chapter 1

Tommy and his friends Martin and Francis are at school camp in Young, where the gold fields used to be, and their teacher, Mrs O’Grady, is teaching them about the gold rush days. Tommy likes camp, except that the camp leader, Mr Porter, is a bit of a bully. We learn that Francis – who has been a troublemaker in the past – is trying to behave better and is being kinder to Martin. Tommy discovers that his mother has taken his cap out of his bag and the only hat he has is his magical cabbage-tree hat. He tries to avoid wearing it but while they are out hiking, Mr Porter puts the hat on Tommy’s head and inadvertently sends him back in time.

1. The author begins by listing Tommy’s feelings about being on school camp. Make a T-Chart to show Tommy’s pros and cons about camp. Do you agree or disagree with Tommy’s list? Why?

2. Start a Character Chart including:

Tommy Bell	Mrs O’Grady	Mr Porter	Martin	Francis

Add to this chart as you learn more throughout the story (\*this can be done individually, or a part of a class display).

3. Page 4 – Did Mrs O’Grady agree with Mr Porter? (Provide examples from the text to support your ideas)

4. Page 5 – Here the author reviews some of Tommy’s previous adventures. How do Tommy and Martin go back in time?

5. Tommy’s camp was in a town called Young.

a) Find it on a map. Where is it, in relation to your hometown?

b) By what name was it first known, and what had it once been famous for?

6. Page 9 – Mrs O’Grady invites the students to imagine the area back in the 1860s. The author describes the beauty and tranquillity of the camp surrounds. Create a chart to compare this description with how Tommy imagines it would look during the Gold Rush days.

7. Make a list of the different jobs that brought people to Lambing Flat in the 1860s.

8. Page 12 – As Tommy and his friends hiked through the bush, Tommy had a big problem. What was it?

9. Research ‘cabbage-tree hats’. Why would people have chosen to wear hats like these? Look at a photographic image, then draw it in yourself.

10. “*Oh dear*, Tommy thought, and the last thing he saw before everything went fuzzy was the worried look on Martin’s face.” Predict what might happen next.

## Chapter 2

Tommy finds that he has been transported back in time. Walking along beside the creek, he sees smoke and comes upon a man by a fire. He realises that it's Ben Hall, whom he met in an earlier adventure. Ben Hall tells Tommy that things have been going badly for him; his wife has left him and he has money problems. He can't go home because he's afraid the police will arrest him. He tells Tommy that he has a new girlfriend and child who are living in a hut on his property. He and Tommy recall the last time they met, when Ben was part of the gang that robbed the gold escort. Ben tells Tommy that some others in the gang were caught; some were imprisoned and one was about to be hanged, but the ringleader, Frank Gardiner, had escaped. He complains about the police who are after him, calling Sir Fred Pottinger a bully. He tells Tommy that he's going to meet up with some friends at 'Little Wombat' and asks Tommy if he'd like to go along. Tommy decides to join him. He knows that Ben has done some bad things but thinks he's not a bad person.

1. As Tommy walked beside the creek, Tommy felt that things had changed. Explain.
2. Page 18 – A Tommy walks through the bush he meets a man by the fire. Add this character to your chart and list some of his features.
3. Ben Hall had worked with Frank Gardiner in the past. According to the author what was one method used by bushrangers to stage a coach robbery?
4. Page 20 - Tommy often see the best in people, as we read in his descriptions of Ben Hall. What circumstances have led to Ben Hall's behaviours?
5. Page 22 – By what other names was Johnny Gilbert known?
6. Who was Sir Fred Pottinger? Add him to your character chart.
7. "*Dobbing on your mates: that's a serious thing.*" Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain, giving reasons for your answer. After sharing your opinions with your peers, have your ideas changed at all? (Ideal opportunity for persuasive argument.)
8. The author discusses the idea of bullying. What is bullying? What acts of bullying do you see
  - a) back in 1860 and
  - b) back at the school camp?
9. Page 27 – "... he got off *scot free!*" What does this mean? Research to find the origins of this phrase.

### Chapter 3

Tommy rides with Ben to Little Wombat and meets some of his friends. He recognises some of the men as members of the gold escort robbery gang and is uneasy. They tell him they are going to get supplies from Mr Solomon's store, and Tommy wonders if they are planning to rob it. His fears are confirmed when they arrive and there is a shoot-out at the store. Tommy ducks for cover and is horrified when he sees one of the gang, Patsy Daley, kick the shop boy. When the gang prepares to leave, Ben asks Tommy to come along. He is torn—he doesn't want to go with them, but he's afraid that the Solomons think he is part of the gang and that he'll be arrested for the crime. So he leaves with the gang and camps out with them in the bush.

1. What was *Little Wombat*?
2. Page 31 - Add John O'Meally to your character descriptions.
3. Page 32 - Add Johnny Gilbert to your character descriptions.
4. Page 33 – The friends were going to fetch supplies from Mr Solomon's store, but Tommy didn't trust them. Why?
5. Imagine that you were to make a movie of the fight scene that begins on page 35. Who would play the main characters?
6. Page 38 – Was George brave or silly to fight back? Explain your opinion.
7. Mr Solomon's store sold many things. Compile a list of items for sale in his store.
8. What would you have done if you had been in Tommy's place?
9. Ben Hall gives reasons to justify his outlaw behaviour. What are they?
10. Tommy suggests a solution to Ben's problem, but Ben doesn't agree. Why?

### Chapter 4

At the bush camp, Tommy wakes to the thudding of hooves and discovers that the police have come. The gang fights back and there is a big shoot-out. The Aboriginal tracker flees into the bush; the policeman runs out of ammunition and surrenders. Ben Hall holds him hostage while the others run after the tracker. Ben soon realises that the policeman is not the man he thought he was, and sits down with him to complain at length about the unfair treatment he thinks he has received. Tommy thinks that Ben is being a bit of a whinger. He convinces Ben to let his hostage go and decides that Ben's not *all* bad—he just needs a friend who will be a good influence. He decides to stick around for a bit longer.

1. The author refers to a tracker who was helping police. What is a tracker? Why were they so important to the police of the time?
2. "*They were all firing... And yet not a single bullet hit its mark!*" Explain this comment (Hint: you may need to research weapons of the time).
3. What strategy did the bushrangers use to overcome the policeman?
4. Ben sits down to talk to Norton, rather than kill him. In your opinion, is this behaviour expected? Why or why not?
5. Add Norton and Hollister to your character web.



## Chapter 5

The gang finds another campsite and Tommy finds himself enjoying camping out in the bush. Ben and Tommy talk about Sir Fred Pottinger and about bullies in authority. Ben hears that Pottinger is back in town and looking for the gang, and the men decide it would be safer to split up. Patsy Daley is captured by police. Ben and Tommy ride to Ben's home to see his girlfriend and child. They arrive to find that the police have set his home on fire. Ben's girlfriend and child are safe but the house is burned down and Ben is angry. On Ben's advice, Tommy decides to leave. He takes off his hat and goes back to the present.

1. As Tommy and the men find another campsite the author continues to build a picture of each of Ben Hall's colleagues. Add more information to your character descriptions.
2. Using a chart, compare camp life with bush life.
3. Add Ben Hall's comments about Pottinger to your Character Chart.
4. Page 58 – Ben was so afraid of Sir Fred Pottinger that it impacted his life. How?
5. Tommy was surprised at how differently Ben was viewed. Write a sentence to reflect how Ben is seen by a) Tommy, b) the farmers, and c) the police.
6. What disaster befell Ben Hall's family home? How did the men try to stop the flames and save the home? Does this differ from how people would fight fires today? Discuss (Remember to think about different places – Would the strategy be the same in a city/in a community in the mountains/on a property in the bush, and how would the strategies change? Who would be available to help in each of these places?)

## Chapter 6

Tommy finds himself back at school camp, in a shallow stream, panning for gold with Francis and Martin. Francis finds some gold dust. The boys are thrilled because Francis wants money to buy a horse (he used to have a horse but it was sold when his family moved). Mr Porter confiscates the gold because the boys were out of bounds when they found it. He then slams Tommy's hat back onto his head and sends him back in time once more.

1. Page 64 – Read this page, and then STOP. Have the boys done the right thing by sneaking off? Why, or why not? What might the consequences be?
2. Page 65 – the author writes: *Tommy was surprised*. Why?
3. Why do you think Martin is happy to break the rules?
4. *And there it was, clearly sparkling on top of a layer of river sand like sprinkles on a cake...* Research and look at some pictures of panning for gold. Is this how you would expect gold to look? What would people do with the gold flakes?
5. What was the boys' reaction to finding the gold? What was Mr Porter's reaction?
6. Page 67 – How do you think Mrs O'Grady will react? Will she support the boys or side with Mr Porter?

## Chapter 7

Tommy finds himself back in the gold rush times, on the verandah of the Commercial Bank at Carcoar. When the bank manager arrives and opens the door, Tommy sees that there's a shoot-out in progress. A bank clerk fires at the bushrangers and two of Ben Hall's gang – John O'Meally and Johnny Gilbert – come running out. They knock Tommy over and, as he falls down the stairs, the hat falls off and he goes back to the present.

1. After Mr Porter shoves the cabbage tree hat on his head again, where does Tommy find himself?
2. Use a map to find Carcoar. How far is it from Young? How far is it from your home?
3. The author refers to the town being 'busy with traffic'. Is the traffic being described that same as traffic today? Explain.
4. Tommy meets a well-dressed man. Who was he?
5. Write a paragraph describing the point of view of these characters during the failed robbery:
  - Tommy as a bystander
  - The bank manager as a witness
  - The young bank teller
  - John O'Meally or Johnny Gilbert

## Chapter 8

Tommy is back in modern times. He is relieved that Ben Hall wasn't involved in the robbery that he saw at Carcoar. He is also upset about Mr Porter confiscating Francis's gold. Martin surprises him by standing up to Mr Porter. Mrs O'Grady surprises him even more by standing up to Mr Porter as well. She takes charge, telling Mr Porter that she will set the rules, and that Francis may have the gold back but he must work to earn it. She tells the boys they must do cleaning duties—including cleaning the toilets. The boys agree. There's one last worry for Tommy: school rules state that he must wear a hat outdoors, but he only has his cabbage-tree hat. Martin solves the problem by lending him a spare hat. Tommy realises how lucky he is to have friends and hopes that Ben Hall won't be too lonely without him.

1. Explain the reaction of the three boys (Tommy, Francis and Martin) to Mr Porter's punishment.
2. Mrs O'Grady changes Francis's punishment. Why?
3. Page 81 – The author implies that Mrs O'Grady's consequences were far fairer. Do you agree or disagree? Explain.
4. Make a list of chores the boys would need to perform as part of those new consequences.
5. Martin proved to be a good friend to both Tommy and Francis – explain how he did this.
6. How do you support your friends? Brainstorm and list as many ideas as you can and share them with your class.
7. The book seems to end without a conclusion to Ben Hall's story. What do you think might happen next? Compile a list of questions for the author.

## Character Profile

### **Ben Hall**

<p>Draw a picture of Ben Hall</p>	<p>Describe how Ben Hall looks</p>
<p>Describe your character's personality.</p>	<p>Describe your character's role in the story</p>

