

The Other Side of Nowhere Teacher's Notes

Written by Steve Johnson

Published by Hardie Grant Egmont, May 2014

SYNOPSIS

Brothers Johnno and Matt are spending their summer holiday with Johnno's best mate, Nick, on his farm just outside the sleepy town of Shell Harbour.

To get away from the farm and off on their own, Nick organises a sailing trip to Lion Island, a small dot of land in the ocean beyond Shell Harbour. Johnno's cousin George joins them for the trip, and soon they are all heading to Lion Island on Nick's yacht.

Everything falls apart when a freak storm hits the yacht. The boat is destroyed, and the four friends nearly drown trying to reach the safety of a beach on Lion Island.

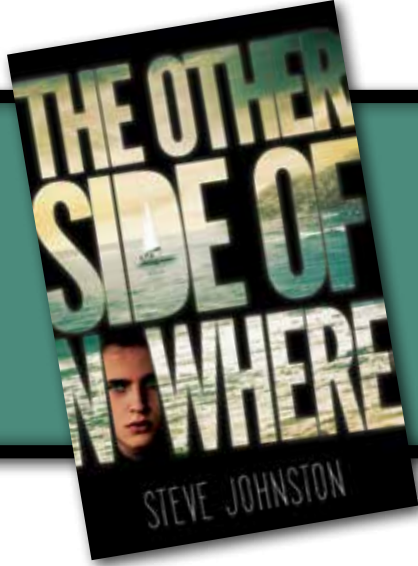
At first Johnno tries to comfort himself with the idea that someone will notice when the four of them don't return home. But then Nick drops a bombshell. His dad – the only person who knows where they are – has a drinking problem and disappears on benders whenever Nick's away. It could be weeks before anyone even realises that they're stuck on the island.

Johnno and his friends soon discover they are sharing the island with some dangerous men. Men with guns. When the men take Matt hostage, Johnno and the others launch a high-risk rescue mission, through the inside of a cliff to the cave where Matt is being held.

But when Johnno reaches Matt, he realises his courage is about to be tested further. Inside the cave are the goods the dangerous men are smuggling: people. With other lives now in the balance, Johnno and his friends embark on a raft of daring escapes and explosive tactics to outwit the traffickers. Through their courage and friendship, Johnno and the others survive their epic adventure and bring the bad guys to justice.

KEY THEMES

The Other Side of Nowhere is a fast-paced adventure novel, filled with exciting twists and turns that drive the storytelling. At the centre of the story are three teenage characters, Johnno, Nick and George, and one younger character, Matt. Through these four characters the novel explores key themes of teenage life: change, friendship, and finding the courage to make difficult decisions and follow through with them.



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Change

Change is a strong theme of the novel and it takes two main forms. We see changes occurring in the characters. For example, we see a gradual change in the way Johnno reacts to his situation. When things first start going wrong he lets the others take the lead. Later, he finds the courage to make decisions for the group.

We also see the effect of change on characters. For example, we find out how big changes in Nick's life – moving from the city to the farm and seeing his mother again – have affected him and the way he feels about Johnno and their friendship.

Friendship

Different types of friendship are explored in the novel. There is the strained friendship of best mates Johnno and Nick. Johnno and his cousin, George, have a very close, trusting friendship. There is also a new friendship and blooming romance between Nick and George. A sibling relationship is also explored in the friendship between Johnno and his younger brother, Matt.

Courage

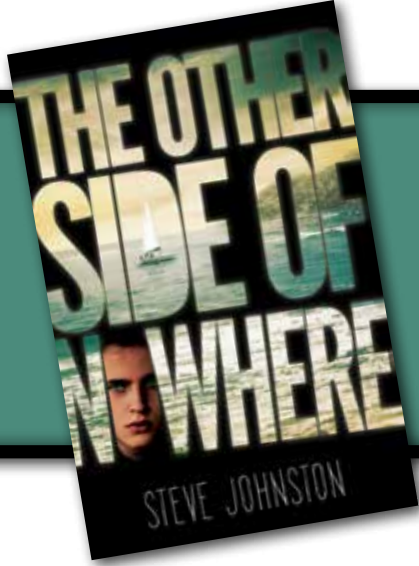
The courage of the four main characters is tested throughout the novel. While Johnno views some of the actions of his friends as brave, he often sees himself as gutless and lacking courage. Throughout the novel we follow Johnno on his journey, from lacking belief in himself, to showing the courage to make decisions for himself and his friends.

WRITING STYLE

This novel is written in first-person narrative. Johnno is the narrator of this story and we see everything that happens in the novel through his eyes.

First-person narrative allows the reader to experience the events in the story almost as if the reader is right in the centre of the story. This approach builds the tension and excitement in the storytelling because the reader becomes part of the action.

This writing style means we hear Johnno's thoughts and see the actions of others in the same way that he interprets them. This makes it possible for the reader to make their own decisions about whether they agree with the way Johnno sees and interprets things. It also allows the reader to see clearly when Johnno's opinions, attitudes and actions change throughout the novel.



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AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Steve Johnston was intrigued by the idea of what can happen when ordinary people are placed in extraordinary circumstances. We can think we know how we will react, but it's only when the imagined actually happens that we really find out: it's only when we are tested that we find out who we really are.

This is especially interesting for young people who, by facing their fears and overcoming them, have the potential to go forth and change the world.

Steve loves to write about these situations, where young people – with all their human frailties – show a kind of resolve, authenticity and leadership that is often absent in adults.

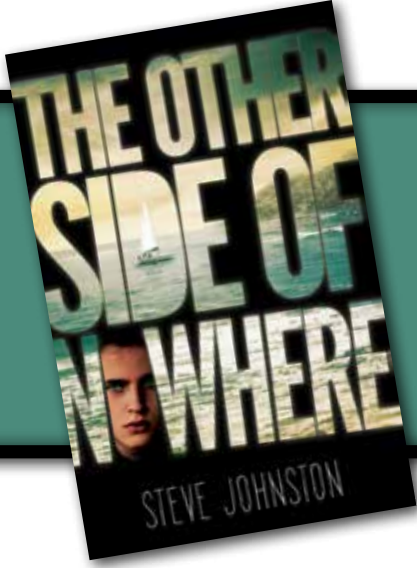
In *The Other Side of Nowhere* he was motivated to create a situation that not only had our heroes in danger and way out of their comfort zone, but also one that forced them to confront the human face of one of our current great moral dilemmas – a test of physical, mental, emotional and moral courage.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

When not writing Steve Johnston is a consultant specialising in developing the next generation of leaders for a wide range of companies in Australia. He is on the board of the Starlight Children's Foundation and a co-founder of the Great Adventure Challenge, which raises funds to help seriously ill children and their families. Stephen has previously authored a bold new vision for leaders: *What do you do for a living?* *The Other Side of Nowhere* is his first novel. Stephen lives in Sydney with his wife, two children and a dog named Buster.

MARKETING & PROMOTION

Will be reviewed widely and available where all good books are sold.



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STUDY NOTES

1. Class discussion

Read out the text below and lead a class discussion with the questions that follow.

In chapter two, Johnno describes how his relationship with his best friend, Nick, has changed over the past year:

Even though we'd been friends forever, it felt like he was keeping me at a distance. Sometimes it felt like I was starting over with him every single day, like I needed to rebuild a bridge that had unexpectedly fallen down overnight.

- What do you think Johnno means by 'it felt like I was starting over with him every single day, like I needed to rebuild a bridge that had unexpectedly fallen down overnight'?
- Have you ever felt like a friend was keeping you at a distance, and what did they do to make you think that?
- What could you do to bridge the gap between you and your friend, so that you were close friends again?

2. Writing exercise

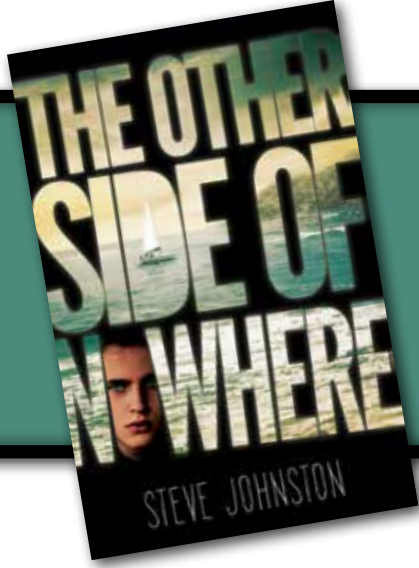
Read out the text below and ask students to explore friendship in a writing exercise, directed by either one of the questions that follow.

In chapter twenty-one, Johnno reflects on his friendship with Nick:

When we were kids I didn't care that he was always calling the shots, and I was just his sidekick. But then he moved away, and when George came back from overseas, I'd started hanging out with her. And I just started feeling differently about things. I knew deep down that Nick wasn't the only one who'd changed. I'd changed, too. I didn't want to be just his plus one anymore. And I figured if he saw me as his equal that maybe we could be real best mates again.

In the extract, Johnno realises that Nick isn't the only person that has changed in their friendship – Johnno has changed, too. Choose **one** of the two questions below and **write a half a page** about friendship.

- What do you think Johnno means by 'I figured if he saw me as his equal that maybe we could be real best mates again'?
- Think about your closest friendship. Are you the one 'calling the shots' or are you usually the 'sidekick'? Or do you and your friend swap roles often?



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3. Small-group discussion

Split the class into two groups. Give each group one of the two scenarios below.

These two scenarios are examples of the characters making difficult decisions under stressful circumstances.

Scenario 1: In chapter six, during the storm at sea, Nick decides the four friends must jump from their yacht and swim through wild seas to reach Lion Island.

Scenario 2: In chapter sixteen, during their first encounter with the bad guys, Johnno decides to make a run from the bad guys and leave his brother Matt to fight them off.

Each group should discuss their scenario to answer the questions below and share their findings with the other half of the class.

- a) Was it the right decision? (Record the vote.)
- b) What were the stressful circumstances that surrounded making the decision?
- c) What decision would you have made if you were in the same situation?

Extension activity: Ask students to write half a page about their own decision-making, exploring the questions below.

- a) When have you made a decision under stressful circumstances?
- b) What was the decision?
- c) What were the stressful circumstances?
- d) What two reasons can you give for making that decision?
- e) Do you still think it was the right decision?