

Josh Short Guide

Josh by Ivan Southall

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Overview

This tightly compressed story takes place during Josh's four-day visit to his Aunt Clara in Ryan Creek, Australia.

Josh has difficulty interacting with the young people in this remote country village; he learns what it means to be an outsider, uncertain of how he is expected to behave. His way of life, code of behavior, and values seem totally foreign to the young people of Ryan Creek, as do theirs to him. He is sensitive enough to grieve when his behavior pains others, and human enough to react angrily when the other young people embarrass him. During his illfated visit, Josh takes a step toward adulthood—he makes his own decisions and follows them. Perhaps of greatest importance, he returns home to Melbourne with his integrity intact, and wise Aunt Clara lets him go.

About the Author

Ivan Francis Southall was born on June 8, 1921, in Canterbury, Victoria, Australia. The son of Francis Gordon Southall and Rachel Elizabeth Voutier Southall, he grew up in Surrey Hills, a suburb of Melbourne, where he attended the local school through the eighth grade. He won a scholarship to Boxhill Grammar School and began writing at twelve years of age.

When Southall was fourteen, his father, who had worked in the insurance business, died. Southall found it necessary to leave school and go to work to help support himself, his younger brother, and his mother. From 1936 to 1941 he worked as a process engraver for a printing firm in Melbourne. At the beginning of World War II he enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force, trained as a fighter pilot, and later became a flight lieutenant, earning the Distinguished Flying Cross. From 1944 to 1946 he worked as a war historian.

Southall married Joyce Blackburn on September 8, 1945, in England and returned to Australia with his wife the following year. They lived for a time in Melbourne before moving to a small farm outside the city. A number of the settings for Southall's young adult books are drawn from this farm in the hills, where the Southalls lived while their four children grew to adulthood.

During these years, Southall supported his family as a free-lance writer, built his own house and raised his own food.

Young Australian readers have been acquainted with Southall's books since 1950, when *Meet Simon Black* was published. Southall says that he first wrote the book as a schoolboy of fourteen. The version published fifteen years later was extensively revised. The nine-book *Simon Black* series features a superhero who, with his fellow agent Alan Grant and an Alsatian dog named Rex, has swashbuckling adventures in outer space and in Antarctica. Squadron Leader Simon Black met his demise one morning in 1960, when Southall says he woke up, thirty-nine years old, determined never to write another such book.

Southall began observing his own children, their friends, and their activities, and soon concluded that therein lay the raw material for real-life stories of far greater interest and worth than the larger-than-life adventures of *Simon Black*. He completed *Hills End* in approximately six weeks. His publishers were taken aback by this very realistic novel, and he had to persuade them to publish it.

During the 1960s and 1970s Southall received a number of literary awards for his books and gained a large U.S.

audience. In 1972 *Josh* earned him the Carnegie Award, the British equivalent of the American Newbery Award, for the best juvenile book of the year. He won the Australian

Children's Book Council book of the year award five times: in 1966 for *Ash Road*, in 1968 for *To the Wild Sky*, in 1969 for *Sly Old Wardrobe*, in 1971 for *Bread and Honey* (published in the U.S. as *Walk a Mile and Get Nowhere*), and in 1976 for *What About Tomorrow?* He received the Australian Writers Award in 1974, and in 1981 the Australian government named him a member of the Order of Australia.

Southall's achievements have been honored in the U.S. as well: he was selected as the Library of Congress's Gertrude Clarke Whittall lecturer in 1973 and as the University of Washington's May Hill Arbuthnot lecturer in 1974.

Perhaps because he has a severely disabled daughter, Southall has long been interested in helping the disabled.

He has served as the foundation president of the Knoxbrooke Training Centre for Intellectually Handicapped in Victoria, Australia.

Setting

Josh takes place in Ryan Creek, a small Australian country town about one hundred miles from Melbourne, during the summer of 1936. All of Josh's cousins on his father's side of the family, even those younger than he, have visited Aunt Clara at Ryan Creek during their summer vacations. Aunt Clara is the oldest of the Plowman clan and the only Plowman remaining in the family home.

The town Ryan Creek was founded in 1853 by Josh's great-grandfather, a member of Parliament, who also designed and built the log railroad bridge across the creek in 1882. This bridge, he hoped, would make Ryan Creek prosper.

Social Sensitivity

Young people often assume that the standard of living, values, and code of behavior that they have been exposed to represent the norm—especially if, like Josh, they have been brought up in a sheltered environment that allows little exposure to other ways of life. Josh travels only one hundred miles from his home but finds that he has entered a completely foreign world. Southall's novel is in many ways a study of cultural relativism, although the reader does not realize this right away because the narrative consists of Josh's immediate perceptions and judgments about people and events. For most of the novel, Josh has no concept of the socioeconomic factors that compel the people of Ryan Creek to behave as they do. Then he learns that Ryan Creek is a poor town that has been hit extremely hard by the Great Depression. Aunt Clara explains that the bludgeoning of the rabbit was not a gratuitous act of violence, as Josh had presumed it to be, but the boys' way of providing food for their families.

Josh's conflict with Harry and Bill is largely the result of misunderstandings and points out the dangers of forming preconceptions about individuals as well as about groups of people.

Josh's experiences in the foreign culture of Ryan Creek present the first real challenge to his value system. His clearcut ideas about right and wrong no longer apply. Finding himself on this shaky ground, he demonstrates his strength of character by refusing to conform just to win peer approval. At the same time, his cordial farewell to the townspeople suggests that he has reached a sort of truce with them; he still does not understand them or want to be like them, but he no longer condemns them for being different from him.

Realizing that he has a lot to learn about himself and others is an important part of Josh's maturation, and he probably undertakes the long, lonely hike back to Melbourne with the intent of evaluating the gaps in his self-knowledge that have led to his disastrous experiences in Ryan Creek.

Literary Qualities

Like James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Southall's novel uses the literary device called "stream of consciousness" to tell Josh's story. All of the events and characters are seen through Josh's eyes. Southall records Josh's every fleeting thought, sensation, and impression as if he were inside Josh's mind. Josh's flashbacks provide much of the story's background. For example, although his mother, father, and sister never appear in the story, the reader forms opinions about them from events and conversations that Josh remembers.

Although a large part of the important action takes place within Josh's mind, the story does not lack external action.

Josh experiences emotional and physical upheaval during the short visit—his private poems are "stolen" and read; he witnesses both the bludgeoning death of a trapped rabbit and Laura's dangerous leap from the bridge; and he is generally pummeled and pushed around. After a few days in Ryan Creek, he emerges a battered survivor of his initiation to the community. This experience also symbolizes Josh's initiation into adulthood.

The structure of the novel follows Josh from his arrival as a child, through his daily rites of passage, and finally to his solitary departure as an independent young man. No fourteen-year-old boy could really undergo the psychological change from childhood to adulthood in only four days, but Southall condenses and accelerates the process, packing the emotional and physical turbulence that overwhelms Josh into tightly controlled sections.

The book is divided into five sections; each covers one day of Josh's visit. In the first four sections, Southall creates compact chapters, encapsulations of Josh's "stream of consciousness" observations and emotions. As Josh's anxiety intensifies and the story builds to a climax, the number of chapters in each section increases from three chapters in the "Saturday" section to fifteen in "Tuesday"; as Josh struggles to control his growing anger and confusion, these chapters seem increasingly tense and choked with emotion. When this tension explodes in cathartic violence in "Tuesday," resulting in the resolution of Josh's crisis and his decision to leave Ryan Creek, the chapter structure ends.

The "Wednesday" section contains no chapters, only a brief lyrical passage; the relaxed prose reflects Josh's new ease with his mature, independent self.

Southall further emphasizes Josh's passage from childhood to young adulthood by framing the novel with contrasting images of Josh's arrival and departure. Josh arrives in the train just as dusk falls, obscuring his view of "the Plowman homestead" and the log railway bridge built long ago by his great grandfather. His journey to Ryan Creek to meet Aunt Clara represents his desire to come to a new understanding of his role as a Plowman; hence the darkness disappoints him. He wants to see the legendary homestead immediately, just as he wants Aunt Clara to approve of him readily. Josh's



arrival foreshadows his difficult maturation experience in Ryan Creek. Southall depicts Ryan Creek as a wild, chaotic underworld, where Josh is unable to function according to his Melbourne codes of behavior.

Only by enduring a series of humbling initiation rites does he come to understand his past and feel confident of his future as the heir to his great-grandfather's legacy. The symbolic "dusk" of Josh's childhood perspective lifts at the end of the book when he begins his journey home to Melbourne— on foot, not by train—under the blue sky and clear yellow light of day. With a more mature perspective, he looks back at his great-grandfather's bridge, acknowledges the affinity he feels for his ancestor, and then continues in the opposite direction, on his own.

The bridge itself symbolizes the crossing from childhood to adulthood and the spiritual bond between Josh and his great-grandfather. The novel's climax takes place near the bridge when the cricket players throw Josh into the water. His great-grandfather's bridge towering over him, Josh nearly drowns, but is "tenderly" rescued by Ryan Creek children who realize he cannot swim.

Through this incident, Josh experiences a symbolic birth into adulthood and into the Plowman legacy. Later, lying in his great-grandfather's bed, Josh speaks with assurance and affection to the presence of his great-grandfather, who stares down at him from a portrait. He feels he understands his legacy and himself as a result of his submersion in the waters of his past.

Themes and Characters

The main character, Josh Plowman, is a sensitive fourteen-year-old who has written poetry throughout his childhood and has won a prize for one of his poems, which was published in a Melbourne newspaper. Josh lives with his parents and his six-year-old sister, Caroline, in a suburb of Melbourne.

Josh has reminded his parents for several summers that all his cousins have visited Aunt Clara and that he should be allowed to do so also. His father objects, pointing out that Ryan Creek is a dull, dusty little country town where little happens. His mother cautions that Aunt Clara can be very strange and that he will not be able to run home if he does not enjoy his visit.

But Josh is eager to visit his father's family home.

The story opens late on a Saturday evening as he rides the train to Ryan Creek. Attracted to Betsy, a pretty girl near his age who jokes with the occupants of the train coach, Josh is delighted to observe that she disembarks at Ryan Creek, as do most of the riders. He later learns that Betsy is the girlfriend of Harry Jones, a large local boy: despite this and the fact that Betsy treats him unkindly, he maintains a romantic interest in her.

Josh's visit is a disaster from the beginning. Gaining Aunt Clara's approval means achieving a proper Plowman status, a factor of critical importance to all the family members.

Josh's anxiety about behaving well and impressing Aunt Clara adds to his awkwardness and leads to a series of amusing but, from Josh's viewpoint, tragically embarrassing incidents.

At Sunday school, Josh is obliged to sit with Harry Jones and his equally intimidating friend, Bill O'Connor, who is Betsy's brother. Bill and Harry seem rough and threatening, but they invite Josh to go shooting with them. When Josh sees Harry kill a rabbit during this outing, he becomes convinced that these boys are cruel and ignorant. Aunt Clara, however, defends Harry, explaining that in the economically depressed town of Ryan Creek, Harry tries hard to live an intelligent, principled life. To him, killing a rabbit that is already caught in a trap is an act of mercy. Bill seems more of a bully than Harry, and a defensive Josh mistakes Bill's gruffness for antagonism. When Bill and Josh fight, it is because Josh goads Bill to violence.

Harry's sister, Laura, whom Josh also meets at Sunday school, develops a crush on him; her persistent attention makes Josh feel uncomfortable. An overweight, unattractive girl, Laura plays on Josh's sensitive nature, telling him that she is motherless in order to gain his sympathy and, she hopes, his affection. Because she is insecure about her talents and appearance, Laura frequently lies, as she does when she tells Josh that she often dives off the bridge.



In fact, she has never done so, and when she actually makes the dangerous jump, she terrifies Josh, who is certain that she is committing suicide. Although Laura baffles him, Josh respects her courage and has faith in her ability as a poet.

Aunt Clara alternately inspires Josh's respect, anger, love, and exasperation.

The Plowman matriarch, she sets strict standards of behavior for Josh. Although she is a small, bespectacled old woman, Aunt Clara's stern, blunt, and demanding manner intimidates Josh, who feels inadequate and stupid in her presence. When she takes his book of poems and reads them without his knowledge—because she wants to learn more about Josh's thoughts and feelings, and because she is proud of his poetry—he is furious that she has invaded his privacy. But Aunt Clara apologizes for her action, and while she continues to impose her standards on Josh, she begins to treat him with tenderness and respect. Esteemed and loved by the people of Ryan Creek, Aunt Clara generously helps pay school tuition for many of the local children, including Harry, Bill, and Betsy, and she offers Laura support and encouragement.

After four days of humiliating experiences in Ryan Creek, Josh decides to leave a note for Aunt Clara and walk back to Melbourne. He thinks it will be an adventure, a bit like his greatgrandfather walking through the wild countryside to found Ryan Creek. Aunt Clara says that the town respects Josh now and suggests that he stay to give the youngsters of the town an opportunity to make amends. But Josh decides to leave and waves to those who have assembled to see him off, beginning a new adventure with his integrity intact. He has learned that being an outsider demands self-evaluation. Josh, who wants to be accepted by Aunt Clara and his peers, is not willing to conform just to be liked. Although he understands that he has been put through initiation rites and that the town is now ready to accept him, Josh chooses to take a long journey by himself so that he can sort through his social needs and ideas of acceptable behavior to decide what his own values are.



Topics for Discussion

1. Does Aunt Clara look forward to Josh's visit? Consider the ways she has mentioned his visit to the young people in Ryan Creek and to her adult neighbors.
2. Is Aunt Clara being unduly critical of Josh when she instructs him to stand up straight, comments on his poor night vision, and states that he is too thin?

What expectations of Josh lead her to make these comments?

3. In the first chapter Josh thinks of Aunt Clara as "the one men touched their hats to, the one the girl almost curtsied to..." What other incidents or descriptions in the book lead you to believe that Aunt Clara is a highly respected resident of Ryan Creek whose judgments are sought and valued?
4. What events in the story would cause you to think that Aunt Clara hopes to introduce some new elements into Josh's life during his visit? Consider the planned trip to Ballarat to purchase a Bible, for example.
5. What objects, events, or comments in the story lead you to believe that Aunt Clara is financially well off? What indications are there that she uses her financial position to assist others in Ryan Creek? How does Josh's view of Aunt Clara's financial condition differ from the Ryan Creek residents' view?
6. What comments or events in the story lead you to believe that the young people are genuinely trying to accept Josh and include him in their activities?
7. How responsible are the other young people for Josh's failure? How responsible is Josh for his failure? Does Josh's failure stem from a misunderstanding of others' attitudes and beliefs?
8. When Josh discovers that Aunt Clara has read his poems while he was sleeping, he accuses her of spying. Do you think she was spying? What do you think her remark, "I had to know," means?
9. Josh and Aunt Clara talk after Sunday school, and he becomes angry at her questions and runs away. When he returns she interprets it as forgiveness for having read his poems and says, "But why have you taken so long to come? A real Plowman like your old greatgrandfather, one with heart. It's a long time I've been waiting for you to come up this path." Is Josh pleased with her comment? What do you interpret the comment to mean? Do you think Aunt Clara approves of Josh more than she approves of the other Plowman nieces and nephews who have visited her? Why or why not?
10. Josh is reduced to tears of rage when he allows the boys to use his stick to club the trapped rabbit. They are amazed at his distress. How do they see the killing of rabbits? How does Josh view the death of the rabbit? What explanation does Aunt Clara later offer for the incident?



11. Why does Laura jump from the railroad bridge into the creek? Judging from Harry's conversation with Josh on Tuesday, what reason has Laura given Harry for jumping off the bridge?

12. Do you think Josh is being fair to Laura when he tells her that he will come to her house for lunch when he does not plan to do so? Is Josh later sorry for the way he has treated Laura?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read another of Southall's books that is similar in theme and style to Josh. Then compare the two books.

Good choices would be *Matt and Jo* or *Walk a Mile and Get Nowhere*.

2. Compare events in Josh with events in Southall's own life. To what degree do you believe the book is autobiographical?

3. Make a list of and explain the words, expressions, or activities described in the book that are characteristically Australian.

4. Read one of Southall's survival stories. Compare the problems of the major character with Josh's problems.

Good choices for exciting survival stories would be *Hills End*, *Ash Road*, or *To the Wild Sky*.

5. Research the geography, weather, and plant and animal life in the area surrounding Melbourne. Write a journal describing Josh's journey back to Melbourne, recording the sights and experiences he encounters.

For Further Reference

Heims, Paul, ed. *Crosscurrents of Criticism*. Boston: Horn Book, 1977. Contains an article by Southall expressing his purpose and standards in writing for young adults.

Saxby, H. M. *A History of Australian Children's Literature, 1941-1970*. Sydney: Wentworth Books, 1971. This book treats Southall as Australia's leading writer of realistic contemporary fiction for young readers. It offers a critical analysis of his major books.

Southall, Ivan. *A Journey of Discovery, On Writing for Children*. New York: Macmillan, 1975. Southall tells of his own writing and describes the ways several of his books came about.

Townsend, John Rowe. *A Sense of Story*.

New York: Lippincott, 1971. The chapter treating Southall in this book gives an in-depth evaluation of his literary style and the scope of his writings.

Related Titles

Southall's early books are stories of physical survival in the face of powerful natural forces. His later books, of which *Josh* is an outstanding example, show a change in direction. The theme shifts to the survival of the human spirit and personal integrity.

Southall's first three books following the Simon Black series—*Hills End*, *Ash Road*, and *To the Wild Sky*—have been referred to as his water, fire, and air trilogy. In *Hills End*, a group of children and their teacher, who have been exploring a cave in search of aboriginal cave paintings, return to find their small hometown flooded and deserted. The action of the story centers on their efforts to organize themselves to survive and rehabilitate their small town until outside help reaches them. In *Ash Road*, three boys on a camping trip accidentally start a huge brush fire that devastates the countryside, causing crises for a varied assortment of characters. *To the Wild Sky* begins with a group of six children being flown from boarding school for their holiday at an outback station (an Australian ranch). The pilot dies of a heart attack in flight. One of the group, the son of the station owner, knows how to navigate the plane in the air but not how to land. The suspenseful narrative traces the group's desperate attempt to land safely.

Gradually Southall changed the focus of his works from survival stories to conflicts with self. *Let the Balloon Go* is the account of a spastic boy's attempts to engage in normal activities despite the restrictions his overprotective mother places on him. *Walk a Mile and Get Nowhere* is set on Anzac Day, the Australian Veterans' Day, and concerns thirteen-year-old Michael, who misses seeing the parade in his town but meets a strange little girl who seems to live in her own world of the imagination. He also meets the town bully. But the real action of the story, as in *Josh*, takes place in Michael's thoughts, which center on problems of war and peace.

Readers interested in an explanation of why and how Southall writes may enjoy his 1975 book, *A Journey of Discovery, On Writing for Children*.



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