

TEACHERS' NOTES

Dangerous Games: Fletcher Smith, Sports P.I.

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Jonathan Harlen was born in New Zealand in 1963. He lived in Israel and England before coming to Australia in 1986. He wrote his first novel when he was just eight years old although he did misspell his name on the cover. Since then he has had over twenty novels published, for children and adults. He lives with his family on a small farm near Byron Bay on the far north coast of New South Wales where he grows coffee and cabinet timbers. On the way to becoming an author Jonathan worked as a journalist, radio comedian, landscape gardener and rock musician. His favourite sports are cricket, tennis, rugby and soccer. He has coached soccer semi-professionally for many years and harbours a dream of one day being an A-League soccer coach. Unlike many of the characters in this book he has never used a performance-enhancing pig's foot.

He says that the intention behind his writing is 'to entertain – pure and simple'. He has written many successful comedies including *The Cockroach War* and *Circus Berzerkus*.

Author inspiration

Jonathan has always wanted to write about the world of elite professional sport. In 2006 he spent five days working with the soccer coaches at the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra. While he was there the idea of a sports detective based at the AIS came to him out of the blue. It nestled in his brain and eventually the character of Fletcher Smith was born.

'The drama and skulduggery that goes on behind the scenes in professional sport is just as entertaining as what goes on on the field. It's a goldmine for a writer! The trick is to find a narrative format that works with this material, and by building my stories around a "sports detective" I think I've found that.'

This is the first of a series of books about Fletcher Smith. Jonathan is writing the second book and has a plot outline for the third.

Jonathan has this advice for those who want to become writers:

'... writing is just like sport. As the great Yogi Berra once said: "It's 90% mental. The other 50% is talent." (He was the same person who said: "It's like déjà vu all over again.")'

Synopsis

Fletcher Smith has inherited his father's one-man sports private investigation agency based at the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra. Both his parents are recovering slowly from nervous breakdowns they suffered after a car accident that nearly killed them and ended any hopes Fletcher had of a career as a professional soccer player. The man responsible for the car crash was his father's arch-enemy, the global sports-management guru, Samson Bolivar. With the help of a sidekick, former boxing champion Frank the Turk, Fletcher has sworn to expose Bolivar and thwart his evil dealings.

The adventure begins when he is hired by rising cricket star Tom Baker to retrieve a lucky pig's foot given to Baker by the legendary Don Bradman. Fletcher quickly finds himself fighting for his life in the dangerous underworld of Australian sport.

To crack the case, he'll need to battle killer sea wasps, outwit a ruthless hit man, avoid being shot

by a deranged tennis prodigy and resist being seduced by the incredible power of the pig's foot.

Discussion points and activities

- ❑ The book is called *Dangerous Games* and the central character is a private investigator in the world of sport. What kind of crimes do you think he might need to investigate?
- ❑ The mysterious black pig's foot was given to Tom Baker by Australian cricketer legend Don Bradman. How much do you know about 'The Don's' career? Form into groups to find out more about Bradman and some of the other famous sportspeople mentioned in the book: Babe Ruth (p67); Emmanuel Petit (p73); Robert Pires (p73); Zinedine Zidane (p73); Thierry Henry (p73); Lilian Thuram; or the football coaching academy *Clairefontaine* (p73) that Fletcher had been accepted into before the car accident.
- ❑ On page 164 Fletcher says, 'You have to cheat to get any success. What kind of success is that?' Have you ever deliberately lost a game? Have you ever moved five spaces on the board when the dice said four? If a football player pretends to have been hurt in order to try to get a penalty awarded against the other team, is that cheating? Why do people cheat? For more on cheating in sport see:
<http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetailsKids.aspx?p=335&np=286&id=1593>
- ❑ In the book, the shrivelled black pig's foot transforms losers into champions. Of those who use the pig's foot who do you think most deserved the success it gave them?
- ❑ In modern sports competition people sometimes use drugs to enhance their performance. Is the use of drugs in sport ever justified?
- ❑ Inga Brunhoff, Samson Bolivar's Swiss mistress, is learning to speak like an Australian. What makes her Aussie English so odd? When Frank the Turk first meets Inga he is speechless. Work with a partner to write a short conversation that could develop between Frank and Inga.
- ❑ The plot of *Dangerous Games* has more twists and turns than a gymnastic display. Divide up the eighteen chapters between the members of the class so that people work with a partner or individually to prepare a summary in less than 100 words of what happens in their chapter/section. Read the summaries in class. You could then create a plot summary for the whole book on the board.
- ❑ Asked if he had anything else he wanted to say to young readers Jonathan replied:

'Other advice? Always go for the winner. It makes life so much more enjoyable. And remember, nobody in sport deserves to be called a genius. A genius is a guy like Norman Einstein.'

Do you agree that nobody in sport deserves to be called a genius?

What do you think 'going for the winner' means?

Does 'going for the winner' always make life more enjoyable?