



THE CAVE

by **Susanne Gervay**

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Reading Notes - *The Cave*

The Cave is a gritty story of courage and hope for those in the passage between youth and adulthood. Both compassionate and confronting, Susanne Gervay takes us on a journey, eight days' camping with the hero Knox and his mates including Fat George, Bennie and Jones, and the evil Watts.

This journey was eight days of descending into fear, exhaustion, ravines and rivers, each in their own way carving out a sense of self-knowing and mateship; eight days of reverie where past and present ghosts comfort and perplex. Ultimately, in the cave, Knox comes to a sense of responsibility and authenticity that is more powerful than the mystery of the Rave Party or Watts metal tip leather boots.

As a psychologist, I recognise the private maelstrom engulfing many young adults, in-transit between powerlessness and independence. As an educationalist, I appreciate the groups' ambivalence towards their two guides, Seaton and Sarah, and towards a society that alienates and fragments. As a reader, Susanne Gervay compels us, like the river that is part of her story, towards the rancid murky Cave, the final place of initiation.

This is an epic story beautifully written with clear spare prose and the ability to go right to the heart of young males in modern society.

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Background

Western societies such as Australia are regarded as "soft" where democracy, technology, education, consumerism, a high standard of living are part of growing up today. Freedoms are

protected under law – anti-discrimination, equal opportunity, freedom of information, privacy, consumer protection, child protection, free speech, labour laws and many others. There is free education, free medical care, a social welfare system. Individual rights and the pursuit of personal goals are a strong creed with adolescents in particular, exploring and experimenting with sexuality, work, spirituality, body image, social groups, music, the internet and the bombardment of images offered by the media and advertising.

With all the privileges of these Western freedoms, has also come breakdowns - high divorce rate, family failure, relationship violence, AIDS, drugs, alcohol, youth gangs, increasing crime rate, destructive debts, ethnic conflict, excessive behaviours, loss of direction, increase in mental illness.

In a bid to help young people find themselves in a society that offers so many options, group outdoor programmes have developed where the “soft” society is stripped bare. There is only one option – making it through the camp, facing the Australian wilderness, meeting extraordinary physical challenges. It is through these challenges that it is hoped that young people gain insights into themselves, their relationships with others and their society. However this is not always the outcome.

The camps throw together disparate people with all their flaws and strengths. It forces them into survival mode as they make the journey through the wilderness of landscape and relationships. Human nature is exposed with all its courage and weaknesses.

The Cave is one such journey.

Masculine Identity

The Cave is about young males on a survival camp. It is an eight day journey into the wilderness set against the backdrop of adolescent male culture with its Rave Parties, body piercing, sexuality, humour, mateship ...

It is an exploration of masculine identity:-

- Leadership
- Courage
- Sexuality
- Friendship
- Violence
- Male communication
- Independence
- Aspirations

Susanne Gervay’s novel, *The Cave*, explores constructions of masculinity with confronting honesty. She questions the traditional forms of masculine rites of passage and challenges the reader to consider alternatives. To Gervay it’s people who count and make a difference, not test of physical endurance and achievement. The boys are positioned to question who they are, and who they hope to become. There are no winners or losers in *The Cave*.

Judy ThistletonMartin
Lecturer in Literature & Literacy
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Characters

Sam Knox

Gervay allows the reader to share the introspective journey of her main protagonist, Sam, takes. The inner, more reflective aspects of Sam's character, parallel the external; difficulties he faces, His relationship with his grandfather unfold through a series of flashbacks, which become an effective device as Sam searches for his own masculine identity. It is Sam's inner reflective journey which has a profound impact on his mere physical experiences, culminating in a courageous personal resolution. Sam is in control emotionally, but never cold or insensitive, supporting "Fat George" and Bennie as they are mercilessly ridiculed by the others, without apology."

*Judy Thistleton-Martin
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The Boys:-

The boys cover a range of characters from the "heroic" Jones to "Fat George" all of whom are part of that journey of survival and change.

Sam Knox
Fat George
Peter Jones
Spano
Bennie
Luke
Con
Andrew
Watts
Robbo

The Supervisors:

Sarah
Seaten

Others:

Grandpa
The Navigator
Laura
Mother

Questions for Discussion

1. Tall, athletic, intelligent, super hero Peter Jones seems the obvious leader. But is he? What is real leadership?
2. Hormones are out of control. How do boys deal with sexuality? With girls? What are their different attitudes to girls? Sam, Peter Jones, Watts, Andrew, Robbo?
3. How does Sam cope with his grandfather's death? How do adolescent males deal with death? Can they talk about it? Do they grieve? Accept? Hide their feelings? Do they have to confront it alone?
4. What is true courage? How do Grandpa, Jones, Sam, Bennie, Fat George show it? Are there different types of courage and/or different ways to show it?
5. Why is sport so important to boys? Does it test leadership, courage, group dynamics, power? What happens to those boys who don't do sport?

6. When faced with the vastness of the wilderness, do young males feel intimidated, challenged? Do they assess what life means?
7. Can a person survive alone? Do they need the group or part of a group?
8. What are the dynamics of male group politics? How does a female like Sarah, influence it?
9. Boys often don't elaborate when they speak to each other. There are usually jokes, sarcasm and bravado. What does it show about male communication?
10. Are boys permitted to ask questions, especially when those questions may show they are "weak"? If boys can't talk about their emotions, do males have to work out issues alone?
11. How do boys communicate with authority such as their parents and teachers? How do parents and teachers communicate with them?
12. Why do some boys attack the weakest member? "Fat George"? Bennie?
13. How can ordinary boys turn to pack violence? Annie?
14. What are boys proving when they climb mountains and forge streams? Does that make them men?
15. What is war? Does it make boys men? Why? How?

Authors' Note

My son was seventeen when I wrote *The Cave*. It was one of the toughest books I have ever written. Writing in first person, getting inside a male's mind was very demanding. It's very different to a girl's way of thinking. My son Jamie was generous in sharing his experiences with me and helping me understand what it is like to be an adolescent male in Australia. He "gave it to me" when I went "soft" in the book. I always listened.

I am surrounded by young males – my nephew, my son, their friends – and I have been caught up in the maelstrom of their humour, hormones, larrikanism and emotions. It is a chaotic, wild time filled with sweaty football boots, endless raids into the fridge, experimentation, mates and girls.

These boys have been on these outdoor camps. Some of them came back shell-shocked at discovering the male capacity for violence. Others came back with an understanding of mateship and courage.

The Cave became a compulsion as I searched and researched the expectations placed on our boys today. It took a year to write as I emotionally journeyed with them into the wilderness and themselves.

Susanne Gervay