

Task for *The Natural Way of Things*

'Red Nose Day': short story from *Black Juice* by Margo Lanagan

Messages:

- The author may have had indiscriminate mass shootings in the USA and Australia in mind.
- The story may be about the dark side of society despite the constant barrage from the popular media for us to have 'fun'.
- The story may be about the isolation of individuals in our sort of society.
- The story may also have an ironic message because of the unexpected consequences of the gunmen's actions, the deaths of Tat and Tif.

Genre:

This story is probably Fantasy. Creation of a parallel world to our own. Familiar and yet eerily different. Author constructs a 'possible world' in which she can explore in a speculative way social phenomena in our own world. A sort of 'What if?'

Style:

- First person narration. The assassin is the focalising character, centre of consciousness, but is this character a reliable narrator? Do we read with this character? Probably not. We start to understand the pathological nature of his thoughts.
- Direct speech. Colloquial speech, e.g. 'rollie', 'drop 'em'.
- Use of French words to make the situation seem exotic.
- Set in Paris? Somewhere in Europe?
- Very evocative descriptions: 'the draught chilling our eyeballs'; 'she was matt-black, with the slender, high-haunched build'.
- Irony: Let's kill 'ones we know and love'.
- Macabre humour: 'Tiny's a good one to start with. Start off small, eh? Start off tiny.'
- Fanciful names for clowns/assassins, e.g. Dogleg.
- Use of similes: bad deeds like 'camp corpses, garbags'.

Theme:

Perhaps the focus is on the twisted psychology of a psychopathic killer who kills for no reason. Is the trashing of religion significant? Loss of a sense of right and wrong? Dark side of a 'fun culture'? Sinister references to religion. The burning of the nunnery? Rumours of the abuse of boys.

- Black juice runs through us all (cover).
- Dark side of humans and of life?
- Hatred, anger, capacity for violence, cruelty.

Characters:

- Narrator. A psychopath? Isolated from others; kills indiscriminately. Motives? Revenge? But could just be using this as an excuse?
- Jelly.
- Clowns, especially Tat and Tif.
- Are these really clowns or privileged members of society? Members of the clergy? There is a strong suggestion that the clowns are in fact privileged members of society who have abused the assassins in some way.

Setting:

- ‘nun’s palace’ torched and vandalised. Did they represent wowsersism? Replaced by ‘fun’ philosophy, but could have a sinister edge.
- Rumours of abuse of boys: “‘If it’s got a red nose, never tell it your true name,” said Frik-knuckles before he went off to the tram station to lay his head on the rail.’

Events:

- Clowns’ competition or privileged buffoons enjoying themselves.
- Two assassins killing clowns.

A review of ‘Red Nose Day’

‘Black Juice runs through us all’ says the banner on the cover of Margo Lanagan’s anthology of short stories. These are stories about the dark side of life and of human nature and that is certainly true of the story, ‘Red Nose Day’.

[Margo Lanagan](#) is a Sydney-based writer who has a number of books to her credit. *Black Juice* is her most successful anthology of short stories to date. Reviews by various newspapers and writers have been unanimously complimentary. Teen writer John Marsden describes these stories as ‘intense, rich, disturbing’ while the *Weekend Australian* described them as ‘breathtaking’. A subsequent review of a later anthology by Lanagan, [Red Spikes](#), was titled ‘A test for your grip of reality’ and that definitely applies to ‘Red Nose Day’.

This is fantasy fiction at its best. Lanagan has created a parallel world to our own, familiar and yet eerily different, a ‘possible world’ in which she can explore in a speculative way social phenomena in our own world. It is, if you like, a sort of ‘What if?’ story. ‘Red Nose Day’ tells the story of two young gunmen who cold-bloodedly assassinate a number of clowns attending a clowns’ convention. Their motives for doing so are never fully explained, but this is a dark world in which religion has been abandoned and replaced by a ‘fun’ culture represented by the clowns who are by no means innocent themselves. It is unclear whether the clowns are indeed just clowns or metaphors for perhaps members of the Roman Catholic clergy or of the privileged upper class of society.

The story is told in first person by an unnamed gunman who sounds quite reasonable, but readers soon understand that this character is a cold-blooded psychopath whose telling of events is not to be trusted. The sinister nature of the story is created by the use of street-gang names for assassins (e.g. Dogleg), very evocative descriptions (a rifle is described as ‘matt-black, with the slender, high-haunched build’ which makes the gun sound like a woman) and the use of similes such as the one which compares bad deeds to ‘camp corpses, garbags’.

The story deals with subject matter which is unfortunately becoming more familiar in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, mass shootings by deranged individuals. It takes a while for readers to understand that this story is about two gunmen who are deliberately shooting the ‘clowns’ and to try to work out their motives for doing so. There is a sting in the tail, but even then readers will have some trouble understanding exactly what has been going on. Still, this openness in the story allows readers to make their own interpretations.

The cover of *Black Juice* is basically black, perhaps a representation of the night sky, but in the top right of the cover are what look like strange bat-like creatures floating or flying against the black background. Along the left-hand edge of the cover is an illustration of a green net-like material against which is foregrounded what could be rather stark pieces of wood. It’s possible that these images are illustrations of one of the stories in the collection. They certainly capture something of the strange nature of the story, ‘Red Nose Day’.

This story is maybe not for everybody. It deals with some dark, troubling issues in our society and not everyone wants to think about these. The writer may have had indiscriminate shootings in the US and Australia in mind when she wrote this story. It may also be about the isolation of individuals in our sort of society. Many older teen readers and young adults would enjoy this story and find it quite thought-provoking.

Other texts which deal with the same subject matter and themes as ‘Red Nose Day’ would include the [novel](#) and [film](#), *A Clockwork Orange*, about a gang member in an ultra-violent gang who undergoes aversion therapy to make him less violent, the [novel](#) and [film](#) *American Psycho*, a psychological thriller about a wealthy investment banker who gradually sinks into a sort of violent madness and even the dark, quirky films of Tim Burton such as [Corpse Bride](#) and [Edward Scissorhands](#).