

Task for *A Bridge to Wiseman's Cove*

Ghost River – summary

Begin by reading this summary of a short extract from *Ghost River*, a coming-of-age novel by Tony Birch, and then answer the questions that follow as a way of exploring the coming-of-age aspect of the story.

Some background to the incident:

Sonny and Ren are Aboriginal boys who live in Collingwood in Melbourne in the 1960s. They are best friends who feel a special relationship with the nearby Yarra River. They have decided that before winter sets in they will jump from the top of the Phoenix Bridge, partly as a tribute to the river and partly to affirm their sense of masculinity. If this jump is successful they plan to jump from a cliff above the river next time. The distance from the bridge to the water is sixty-two feet, what Ren considers a 'suicidal jump'. Sonny has already completed his jump and now it is Ren's turn.

The summary

- Ren climbs over the safety fence and looks down at the Yarra River below. He is terrified. It is a long way down and he has never jumped from this height before.
- He would probably retreat from the jump but his friend Sonny, who has already jumped, ridicules him by calling out, 'Chicken', 'Chicken'. Ren feels that his sense of masculine courage is being challenged. He decides that he has to jump.
- Ren jumps awkwardly. He hits his face on the surface of the river, water rushes into his nose and mouth and his eyes are damaged. For a moment he can't see.
- Sonny laughs at Ren. He says, 'Ren, you're crying blood' and 'You head-butted the river.'
- Sonny is happy at finally having completed the Phoenix jump successfully. On the other hand, Ren suffers a headache and a puffed-up face.

Now answer the following questions about this summary of the passage from *Ghost River*.

Questions:

- In this story Ren is obviously the 'focalising' character, the character who provides a certain perspective on what happens in this particular incident.
- In the original story Tony Birch has used the following verbs to represent Ren as a thinking, feeling and perceiving young man. Will he change in a positive or a negative way, do you think?
 - 'made' the mistake
 - 'froze'
 - 'felt' fear
 - 'to know' his friend was laughing at him.

- On the other hand, how is Sonny represented? Here are some of the verbs that are associated with this character:
 - ... *Sonny 'screaming' out*
 - ... *'clucking' like a demented hen*
 - ... *(Sonny) 'was laughing' at (Ren)*
 - ... *finally 'having completed' the Phoenix jump.*
- Remember that verbs realise a range of processes (such as doing, saying, thinking, feeling, perceiving, relating and so on.)
- What challenges do the boys seem to have set themselves as milestones along the way to manhood?
- Why does Sonny call out from the river 'Chicken', 'Chicken' at Ren before he jumps?
- Ren has feared that jumping from the Phoenix Bridge could be 'suicidal'. Why then does he go ahead with the jump? Why does he feel that he has 'no choice but to jump'?
- What do you think Ren may learn from this incident? How will this incident change him, do you think?
- Do you think that this extract from a story has given you a better idea of the features of a 'coming-of-age' story?