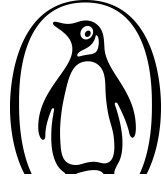


Teachers' Notes

Written by Pam MacIntyre



Nine Hours North

by Tim Sinclair

Plot summary

Twenty-one-year-old, dreamy Adam is teaching English to businessmen in Japan with his girlfriend, Sarah who teaches at a prestigious school. He feels hemmed in by unfulfilling work, a claustrophobic Nagoyan apartment, and a four year relationship that is spiralling to its conclusion. The disintegration of the relationship is heightened by being in another country, landscape and culture.

Adam hasn't immersed himself in the expatriate life, undertaking only part time work, maintaining his distance. He is moping and drifting when Marianne enters his life and he falls for her in a big way. She prompts him to take back some control over his life, though perhaps not how he imagined. There are only two months more teaching English until Adam and Sarah embark on a cycling trip around the scenically beautiful Hokkaido, and then Europe. The trip results in an ending, new beginnings, and dreams waiting to be fulfilled.

For older students, this verse novel explores a complex intermingling of the relationship and the country, and contrasts such as order versus spontaneity, day-by-day existence versus the possibilities of the future.

Mode of telling: Verse Novel

Free verse

This is a verse novel which tells its narrative in 'free verse' which does not rhyme, and whose rhythm or cadence varies throughout in an uneven pattern. While verse novels appeal to a wide range of readers, they are particularly attractive to students who are not readily engaged as readers: they are read easily and quickly and compress actions, detail and thoughts into intense, impressionistic snapshots.

Cinematic Style

While this is an 'internal' story of Adam's growth and move to taking some action over his fate, it is also very visual, cinematic in style: read page twelve, with its panning bird's eye view, a 'zoom' in on the characters, followed by a close-up of

the taxi and then an even closer concentration on the expression on the face. Sinclair uses cinematic language in this poem: 'zoom', 'close-up'.

Vivid Imagery

Verse novels readily allow readers into events and the minds of the characters. Also, being poetic texts they scaffold readers into the metaphoric and playful nature of language and are linguistically rich without the prolix description of prose: For instance on page 28, Sinclair evokes the landscape:

*'This city sprawls – industrial creep –
highways heavy with trucks.
Diesel churns over houses and apartments,
over rice paddies – those sad rural remnants –
over two small cyclists/on the side of the road'.*

And other example:

*'She has a backpack and a frontpack
And duty-free bags and a coat and scarf,
And seems quite unbothered
By it all' (p. 5)*

'Subsistence' (beginning page 12) could be story boarded or computer animated as interpretation: the words suggest a tone of ennui that could be expressed visually through colour, body language, angle etc.

- Have students find other examples that are highly visual and yet also suggest an emotional tone, such as *'The castle on Dog Mountain'* (page 41)

Colloquial language/vernacular

Verse novels often use colloquial language or the vernacular. For example, on page 21:

*'arms spread wide in my wanker car salesman
some day all of this could be yours'.*

Invite students to find other examples that they enjoy and consider why Sinclair has used this language, what it reveals about Adam's character and personality, for instance.

Pared down language

There is less description than in a novel, less background information given so readers have to work actively to fill in information. Students are often familiar with this form of language from song lyrics. It gives a sense of immediacy and veracity about everyday life. For example, read the poem *'Eggplant Tempura'*, and

examine how the cooking and the conversation happen simultaneously as they do in daily life (p. 4).

Poetic Language

While it is a novel there is much poetic language to be enjoyed in this story and which is worth exploring with students for its economy and punchy effects. Look for examples of compression of image and feeling, such as:

- *after a long ugly drunken* (p. 20)
- *Hot water sucks the day
from our bones* (p. 34)
- *how I blacksoled
around the street of Adelaide.* (p. 101)
- *apartment buildings
Blade Runner up
to the low-slung sky....
Two aliens
cycling through techno city
laughing* (p.74)
- *Another shoe box,*
- *But I've been battery caged for so long*
- *It seems normal* (p.20)
- *Bones of the earth
with the breath not far behind -
The rocky slope fissured
with jets of steam* (p.164)
- *We're somewhere in the pointlessness
of three quarters up and one quarter down* (p.165)
- *the weep of kisses
the wordless hold* – (p.179).

These stylistic examples can be rich models for writing. Ask students to find examples that resonate with them and try writing in this style.

Japanese Language

Apart from the examples of poetic and playful language drawn attention to above, is the pleasure of Adam's world weary tone, wry humour and the sprinkling of Japanese words that add an exotic feel, and sense of place to the story. No glossary is supplied but we can gauge meaning from the context. For example:

Gaijin (p5)

Tatami p7)

Sensei (p13)

Genkan (p46)

Izakaya (p82)

Edadame (p82)

Tofu dengaku (p.83)

Gomi (p113, 114)
Raman (p130)
Anpan (p.130)
Omiyage (p.147)
Onsen (p.159)

Playful Language

On page 86 Sinclair uses a couple of evocative collective nouns:

- *...its ooze of lecherous gaijin men
and its pout of rebellious Japanese women.*

Have students come up with some of their own such as:

- school
with its whinge of teachers,
and its ringtone of students

Structure

Nine Hours North does not proceed in a linear fashion but moves forwards and backwards in time, giving us snapshots of Adam and Sarah's lives, rather than a full explication.

Consider the effect of this on the reader – how it positions us to see their lives, and also why the author chose to do this – relationship between form and content.

The story opens with a prologue and a title including the word 'conclusion', in which Adam reveals that he is in a state of indecision. We know then that the rest of the novel will be tracking the journey to this point. This creates a sense of anticipation, and helpful clues as how the events might unfold.

Sinclair uses foreshadowing:

*'How easily
these decisions
are made.'* (p.4)

Each chapter is given a title – sometimes cryptic, sometimes descriptive - rather than a number.

- Discuss reactions to this and what it achieves for the reading.

Also, each chapter begins with an image, a sketch that suggests the tone of what is to follow.

- What is the effect of the illustrations? Could you 'read' them without the chapter titles?

Central events

This is a carefully structured novel in which the reader must pay attention to all the parts, and the following are worth close analysis in particular:

The Id Bar

Adam and Marianne talk for two hours.

- How do you read Marianne's reply '*It's amazing every time*'?
- Does Adam read into it what he wants to find there? (p.80)

Discuss this sequence in the Id Bar (pp.85-89).

- What do you make of Marianne's actions?
- Is she trying to tell Adam something?
- Is she displacing her feelings about Adam?
- Is she playing games or letting Adam go gently?

Consider that we only have Adam's point of view and interpretation of events and that Sarah and Marianne are presented to us through his lens.

- Particularly since Adam has such a world weary take on the world, it might be useful to write some scenes, such as these in the nightclub, from either or both Sarah and Marianne's perspective.

In the Storm (page 92 onwards)

Adam expresses eloquently his feelings for Marianne.

- Consider whether you think he is genuinely in love, obsessed, or attracted because she represents the freedom he longs for.
- Discuss the significance of Marianne. Is she, perhaps, the catalyst for change rather than the love of Adam's life?

Adam has left work and he and Marianne spend an evening together doing silly, childish things – running barefoot in the rain (cliché?) and rolling down a grassy slope. And yet he is unable to kiss her or tell her how he feels (pp.101-106).

- Is he 'the nice guy' as he says, or simply gutless, or unable to make any decisions on his own?

Marianne hugs him to say goodbye.

- What does this suggest about her feelings towards Adam? (p.109).

Last before leaving (page 112 onwards)

Adam ritualises '*that last time*' for various actions: Last meal, last drinks, last bath (p.118).

- Why does he do this, do you think?

Snapshots (page 122 onwards)

This section, the journey to Hokkaido, marks important turning points for Adam.

- Consider that while it is an actual journey, it is also an important metaphoric journey for Adam in terms of his life.

On page 125 it is as if Adam is in Japan for the first time. Sinclair uses pastoral imagery in this section and it might be valuable to explore the notion of the pastoral and how it has been used by writers over time. For example, the serenity of the countryside lifts of the page, and on page 126 Sinclair conjures the attraction of the simple life of the fisherfolk. The whole feel of the book changes here. See also page 132.

This idyllic image is marred somewhat by Adam's constant longing for Marianne, comparing what he imagines she would do with the reality of Sarah.

- How much is Marianne constructed, idealised by Adam?

Shiraoi

There are subtle changes in Adam's behaviour and attitudes that signal he is finally accepting his lot rather than always dreaming of something better, and taking some control and decision making, such as on pages 137 and 138.

There is also some greater self-awareness:

Can't help feeling suspicious.

Can't help feeling ignorant, either.

I don't know enough to be impressed

and I don't know enough to be disgusted,

so all I can do is be cynical (p.139).

Shikotsuko (pages 144 onwards)

Consider language choices here and what they reveal about Adam's evolving state, 'serenity' for example, and laughing at the invasive Winnebago.

Reacting to the food crisis, Adam calls himself '*self-reliant*' and on page 150 '*I could do this on my own*'. And he does find the courage to ring Marianne.

There are other language choices that signal the subtle change '*anonymity*', '*free*' '*self-reliance*'.

Asahidake

The physical and metaphoric meet on the top of the mountain peak. Adam and Sarah reach it, separately, and it is shrouded in mist (p.166).

- Consider that the poem '*The other side*' is a description of their relationship, rather than just the decent from the mountain (p167). Also contrast its symbolism with '*Consensus*' (p182).

The storm and the rain that threatens to blow their tent apart is often used symbolically in films, to return to the cinematic style, to signal a turning point.

- Is this how Sinclair is using it here? (p.172-174). Think of examples of when it has been used in movies.

It is Sarah who raises the issue of the end of the relationship and reveals that she has been aware of it for weeks (p.176).

- What does it tell us about Adam that he has never considered this?

On page 177 Sinclair returns to his filmic associations, with Adam believing he is in a movie.

- What was he expecting? That he would go on longing for Marianne while staying with Sarah?
- Is Sinclair suggesting that Adam has just been acting a role he has created for himself all along? Is this because he can't accept himself?

Discuss the shift on the following page and what it tells us about Adam now and what he understands about himself:

*I'm this Adam now
this moment this reality,
this scene is taking place
and I'm in it so completely
I forget to watch myself.
I forget to take notes (p178)*

In transit

The title of this suggests that Adam is still a work in progress. He can confess to Sarah about Marianne, and chooses finally to speak of the relationship, if that is what it was, in the past tense (p.193).

Adam's recognition of his short-sightedness in Japan prepares him for new attitudes and choices (p196).

The final words in the novel are of a beginning, not an ending.

- Imagine what you think will happen to Adam on the next leg of his journey. Write, act or storyboard the possibilities.
- Imagine you met Adam in five years. Write a poem in the style of Sinclair to evoke the adult Adam.

Tone

Adam relates events in a kind of cynical melancholy manner, as if being angry might expend too much energy.

- Is Adam being self-indulgently maudlin? Does nothing please him?

For example even the park, despite its green beauty, is too ordered for him:

*golf-green grass on hills
that are earth-mover smooth (p.32)*

- Is it fair to say that Adam likes life to be jagged and messy? Consider his reactions to Sarah's planning.

- Also on page 93 he says that Marianne is making his life *'beautifully confusing'*. Is Adam simply immature, and unable to accept that adult life involves routine and commitment?

Perhaps track some of the events that lead to Adam's ennui. He and Sarah went to Japan for the overseas experience, but find themselves living the lives of expatriates. For instance, on page 38, while Sarah has made a friend in Midori, Adam *'teases her about going native'*.

- Marianne's 'don't care' attitude appeals to Adam, but isn't he just as uptight as Sarah in his own way? (pp. 39-40).
- Discuss what attitude is revealed in *'It is worth seeing/I've got to admit it.'* (p.41)
- Why has Adam deliberately kept his distance from the language and the culture? He suggests that it is because it makes the ubiquitous advertising look beautiful: *'smoking prohibitions/become exotic'* (p. 41)

Michael's house symbolises the Japan that Adam thought he was coming to:

'the Japan of sushi and Sumo wrestlers, of Samurai and sake' (p.46)

- What does this reliance on stereotypes tell us about Adam's preconceptions of what life would be like in Japan?
- Michael comes to the door in a kimono, and shoes must be left at the door in his house, suggesting that he has embraced cultural conventions. Why can't Adam?
- Discuss some common stereotypes held about Australia, and how the way most of us live might shock and disrupt those who come to live here.

Adam can't remember when the interesting parts of his life became obstacles.

- Is this because of the relationship breaking down? Or is it perhaps that Adam's gap between expectations and reality is too wide? (p.67)
- Adam feels sorry for what he has lost almost as if it is out of his control. Is that the way it happens, or do we make choices about our lives? (p.67)

Characters

Adam

- If you had to describe Adam in one word, what would it be?
- Would it be the same word at the beginning, middle and end of the story?

He is cynical when we meet him first: how he describes his training and his boss on page 14. Sinclair is very frank about Adam and we see him warts and all. We build up a more complex picture of him as the story progresses: his need for greenery and open spaces (p. 20); he tunes out of talk about jobs (p.22); he likes

living in the moment (p.30); *'I like my dreams fantastic,/and I like my future/day by day/* (p.59).

He is self-absorbed and wants Sarah to be playing a role like he is (p.52).

- Is it the hypocrisy that offends him? Or is he playing the game too? (p.53)

Powerful images of disconnection and a sense of oppression:

*The lake with its moon-tinted ripples
might as well be tatami,
the night all around us,
the crumbling walls
of our apartment* (p.55)

He makes constant comparisons with home (p.57) although he felt hemmed in before he left Adelaide.

- There are moments of junction with the world, but they are rare (p.33). Find some others and talk about what they reveal about Adam.
- What does Adam's experience tell us about the idea that you can't escape yourself?
- He thought Japan would settle his unease and disaffection, yet it exacerbates it. How does he finally move to some resolution and sense of equilibrium?

Sarah

- If you had to describe Sarah in one word what would it be?
- Would it change throughout the story?

Adam is always critical of Sarah and her attitude towards work.

- Is she a work-a-holic or a realist? (p.23) Consider her actions at the end of the novel.

Adam often recalls Sarah as a student and becomes irritated by Sarah, the worker and planner.

- But life is different now isn't it? (pp.24-25). They have responsibilities and it seems Adam doesn't want to be realistic about them.
- It is Sarah who is making the trip happen? (p.29) Does Adam make anything happen?
- Why is Sarah crying? Is it just a movie as Adam thinks or is he extremely thick as far as Sarah's feelings are concerned? (p. 78)
- Does it surprise you at the end that Sarah is the one to initiate the split? It might be useful to reread the story and identify sections when Adam can't see the wood for the trees.

Marianne

- What do you make of her?

- Is she the free spirit that Adam sees?
- Has he 'created' her in a sense, out of his own unhappiness and longing?
- Is she enigmatic, or is it that Adam isn't very good at 'reading' other people? Consider for example how Adam interprets '*you made it*' and what she means (p.99).
- What do you think would have happened if Marianne had answered the phone when Adam rang her, during the cycling trip? (p.151). Write the conversation in free verse, or act it out.

Setting – ideas of other places

Sinclair positions Japan in this story, through Adam's reactions to it, as alienating and too foreign. Trace some of these reactions and discuss whether this is an inevitable stage in living in another culture or country, or a reaction Adam has chosen. For example, his ride home on page 15 appears to be purely descriptive, but think of what he has chosen to notice, to describe.

On page 31 Adam describes the countryside as '*a different world*'.

- Discuss Sinclair's language and image choices here.

On page 122 are international icons associated with countries – Adam names '*that Eiffel Tower*' and '*that Sydney bridge*'.

- What other symbols do people automatically recognise and associate with particular places?
- What do these symbols tell us about the places they are attached to, such as, what is viewed as important?

Symbolism

- What is the significance of bike riding (the journey) throughout the story?
- What does it mean for Adam, for Sarah and finally for the narrative itself?

Think of other stories that use journeys such as Kerouac's *On the Road*, Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Hatherley and Cope's *Off the Rails*, Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman's *Long Way Round*.

Music, books and movies

It's always valuable, and interesting, to follow up on the references in novels to texts that the author connects with his story.

- Play some *Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds*, and talk about how Cave's lyrics might connect with Adam's story, and the music with Adam's mood of melancholy.
- Listen to *Headless Chickens* tracks. Are their music and lyrics similarly 'dark', like Nick Cave's? What does this musical background add to the reading?

Sinclair also makes reference to some classic works of science fiction, the film *Blade Runner* and the author John Wyndham.

- How do these references add to our understanding of the story, and of Adam?

Sinclair also uses the title of a famous World War 2, Steve McQueen movie, *The Great Escape* on page 17.

- We don't have to recognise these references, but what is the effect on the reader and our reading of the story if we do?

Other texts

Contemporary free verse novels can be placed within the context and tradition of narrative poems such as Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and Australian bush ballads such as *The Man from Snowy River* by Banjo Paterson.

As an introduction to the form of the verse novel, perhaps share some free verse poetry such as that of Walt Whitman whose *Leaves of Grass* is regarded as a significant example of cadenced verse. For example:

*All truths wait in all things
They neither hasten their own delivery nor resist it,
They do not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon.*

Other poets to explore are Rilke, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound

Books

How the Light Gets In by M. J. Hyland is an engaging, very funny and moving story of an Australian girl who attempts to escape her life by going on exchange to America.

Other verse novels

- *A Dangerous Girl* and the sequel, *The Year it All Happened* by Catherine Bateson.
- *Love, Ghosts and Nose Hair* and its sequel *A Place Like This* by Steven Herrick.
- *Jinx*, by Margaret Wild.

Films

- *Lost in Translation* is also set in Japan and examines cultural dislocation.
- *The Spanish Apartment* and its sequel *Russian Dolls* are about expatriates - students in the former, workers in the latter - and cultural differences and stereotypes.