

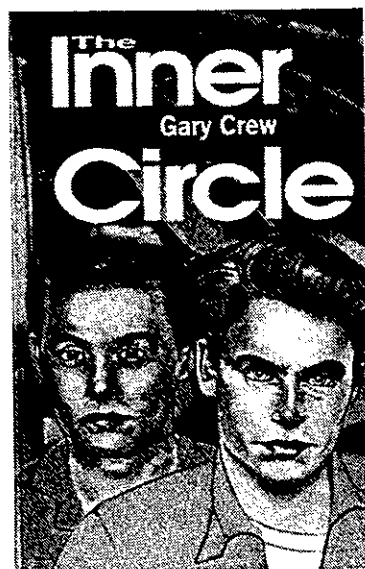


## Objects Strangely Familiar: Symbolism and Literary Allusion in the Novels of Gary Crew

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In recent years Gary Crew has established himself as one of Australia's foremost writers in the field of adolescent literature. His work is structurally, thematically and linguistically complex yet still accessible to his target audience of young adult readers, thereby forming a much needed bridge between popular culture and the more challenging and traditional 'classics'. While all Crew's novels deal with adolescent self-discovery these rites of passage are carried out within a framework which explores far-reaching historical, political, moral and religious values. Like his predecessor, Lee Harding, Crew draws on the literature of our culture to convey his ideas; his works reveal the legacy of the likes of Patrick White, Randolph Stow, Edgar Allen Poe, and the Bible.

Crew has an ability to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. In order to do this he uses the devices of symbolism and literary allusion. Symbols, objects, literary references and repeated motifs are used to create an element of unreality, taking that which is familiar and making it strange. Often the narrative slips between the natural world and the realm of the supernatural, with symbols and objects used to link the two. The signifiers that Crew uses, however, suggest a



number of readings so that there is not one knowable interpretation of the texts. If viewed in the light of Jacques Derrida's theories of deconstruction, much of Crew's work can be seen to have deliberately blurred boundaries; binary oppositions are dissolved and destabilised which results in meaning being constantly deferred. In this sense his signifiers are highly provisional and much of the appeal of his work arises from this 'continual flickering, spilling and defusing of meaning.' (Eagleton 1983, p.134).

His first novel, *The Inner Circle*, uses the symbol of the mandala to explore racial disunity and the search for a sense of wholeness within the

self. Tony and Joe, the main characters, represent the tension between what initially appear to be opposite characteristics. Firstly they are 'opposites' in a cultural and racial sense; Tony is white, affluent, and educated while Joe is an Aborigine, poor and an early school leaver seeking to find a trade. Emotionally they are very different too. Tony holds the world at arm's length, fearful of being hurt again as he was by his parent's divorce and their unconscious but selfish rejection of him. He longs for closeness yet fears it; his friendship with Joe allows him to open up and confide in someone but when he becomes aware of his own vulnerability during a fishing trip, he immediately pulls back and cruelly rejects Joe calling him 'black boy' and telling him to 'get lost' (Crew 1986, p.87). He admits to himself, 'I was scared to death, frightened of anyone getting too close, of letting anyone in to creep around inside.' (Crew 1986, p.85). By contrast, Joe is warm and friendly, willing to involve him in meaningful human relationships. He comes from a close-knit Aboriginal family where love and sharing are encouraged and there is a strong sense of kinship.

This interaction of opposites is reflected also in the structure of the novel. The two first-person

narratives interweave to present both sides of the same coin and reinforce the sense of duality which pervades the novel. The central mandalic symbol is used to represent the coming together of these opposites, a co-existence producing harmony and totality, a protective 'inner circle' signifying spiritual wholeness. So it is mutual dependence which is the basis of this duality, not opposing forces. In this way Crew avoids simple binary opposition by demonstrating the complementarity of qualities displayed by the boys.

The symbol of the mandala takes many forms in the novel, the main one being the Binkar cabbage palm surrounded by a circular bed of roses in the park. Joe identifies with the Binkar palm because it is well known to his people and native, like him. He wants to be like the palm - useful not just decorative, firmly rooted in the land to which it belongs. He even seeks refuge beneath it when chased by Lenny and Blue, two white boys who set out to get him drunk and steal his money. The roses around the palm represent all that is alien, introduced, European; and yet together the two form the one garden, the circle, but with boundaries. Joe explains this to Tony:

*'It's like us,' he said. 'All wrong, but all right. You're as English as those roses; I'm as native as that palm. They're both growing. The only thing wrong is the edge. It's as if there's a border we can't cross, a sort of fixed boundary that separates what we know from the rest; the park is what we should be like, everyone, all together.'* (Crew 1986, p.50)

The mandalic symbol is repeated throughout the novel in such forms as the wheels of the BMX bikes (a notable feature of the cover design of one edition), the circular pattern of flowers on the lid of the battered biscuit tin in which Joe keeps his letters, the central medallion of the 'Native Wheel of Fire' flower carved in the red cedar chair in Al's workshop, the circular tray Al serves tea on featuring the Indian girl, dancing in a fiery hoop, and the circular teapot stand Joe carves in the shape of the Binkar palm for his mother. There is also the ring which belongs to Tony's mother, Angie, and the school oval where Tony and Annie, Joe's sister, stand, in the centre, contemplating the merging of boundaries where the bush has encroached upon the neat playing field so that there's 'no real boundary anymore - unless it's the bush.' (Crew 1986, p.110).

The novel ends on an affirmative note consistent with

the theme of unity and wholeness. Tony has left in search of self but in an action suggestive of regeneration and hope; Joe plants Tony's potted palm (a non-native European Fan Palm) alongside the Binkar palm:

*The fronds were dying but a green shoot at the centre was healthy, the roots were strong. With my feet, stamping toe and heel, toe and heel, in a mad circular dance. I pressed it into the waiting soil. Two palms now, together. Maybe I couldn't alter the border, but one thing I knew for sure, the centre I could change. There was room for two.* (Crew 1986, p.113)

There is much that is familiar about *The Inner Circle*, including strong echoes of Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala*. Tony and Joe are very like Waldo and Arthur Brown, the twin brothers in White's novel; they seem to form the two halves of a divided self. In both novels the mandalic symbol is central, representing totality and unity, the co-existence of complementary forces, the yin and yang of Eastern philosophy, the duality within us all. The circles spinning constantly throughout Crew's novel are also reminiscent of the circular symbolism in Randolph Stow's *The Merry-go-round in the Sea* which is

also about a young boy's quest for self-identity. For this reason Crew's novel could prove to be an excellent stepping-stone for young readers moving on to more demanding and complex texts such as these two modern Australian narratives.

Young readers find themselves introduced to elements of Eastern philosophy in Crew's next novel, *The House of Tomorrow*. The title comes from Kahlil Gibran's 'The Prophet', a poem about personal freedom, rebirth and 'life's longing for itself'. The two elements of fire and water are used constantly throughout the novel which is narrated by Mr. Mac, the aging schoolteacher who takes under his wing the sensitive but disturbed Danny Coley, a young boy wrestling with 'voices' he hears and his own sense of displacement. The same sense of duality seen in *The Inner Circle* emerges again in these elements: water can signify both death by drowning and rebirth by baptism as found in Christian philosophy. Danny writes about the drowning of a small boy and his parents, (a scene he is convinced he has witnessed), and later in Mac's office he sits transfixed as Mac reads about the whirlpool in Poe's 'A Descent into the Maelstrom'. Peter Cooper's description of a

flood in Malaysia where an entire family is drowned except for an eight year old boy, echoes Danny's story but a sense of rebirth is achieved when it is revealed that this orphan is renamed 'Danny'.

This becomes even more significant when we later learn, after Danny's death, that Liz and Leigh, unable to have children of their own, have adopted this child and presumably this is the 'small boy, his skin golden, his hair liquid darkness' who comes running up to Mac on the beach at the close of the novel (Crew 1986, p.185). It is as if Danny has been reborn, rising phoenix-like from the ashes of his own death by fire in his grandfather's house, a scene Danny himself foresaw in one of his 'dreams'.

Fire as a cleansing, purging element signifying renewal through 'death' is also seen in Mac's symbolic action of burning his dead wife's wedding dress and veil. For so long he has clung to his memories of Margaret and the baby who died with her during childbirth but now he rids himself of the past in order to move on, to be 'reborn'. Danny's grandfather's attempts to burn papers revealing that Danny's real father was Uncle Keith and his mother a part-Asian woman, can also be seen

as an attempt to wipe out the past so that Danny has a fresh start. In this way Crew explores the issues of rebirth and regeneration found in Gibran's poem and raises interesting questions about the 'progression of the human soul', a concept found in the Eastern philosophy which has brought such peace of mind to Peter Cooper. Birth and death are therefore two significant symbols in this novel.

There are many literary allusions scattered throughout the text (which reads almost like an English teacher's 'Wish List'!), perhaps the most significant being the reference to Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. Like Poe, Crew has created a world where there is no clear delineation between the real and the imagined. Danny's fascination with the story 'The Tell-Tale Heart' mirrors the reader's own fascination with a narrative in which dreams and imagination are as vivid as the real world. The 'voices' Danny hears cannot be dismissed purely as imagination or symptoms of teenage angst; they are too insistent, too profound. These are the voices of his ancestors, calling him, reminding him of who he is. Mac too has his own dreams, his own voices; the past calls him also, washing over him in a flood of 'stream-of-

consciousness' thoughts about Margaret, their marriage, her pregnancy, the miscarriage and subsequent death of both her and the child. Danny's grandfather also hears voices and it is no mere coincidence that he lives in a town called Balnibarbi, the same name as the island in *Gulliver's Travels*, where the inhabitants created many languages (Pearce 1990, p.53).

Again we see Crew taking the familiar and making it strange, making the reader question reality. For Danny and Mac (and, to some extent, the reader) time becomes fluid, indeterminable, ambiguous. Crew's reference to Poe at the very start of the novel is clearly a sign which prepares us for his own 'tale of mystery and imagination'.

Nowhere is this meshing of the real and the supernatural world more apparent than in Gary Crew's next novel, *Strange Objects*. Michael Stone places the novel in the realms of the Pure Fantastic because the reader hesitates between a natural and supernatural explanation for the events. (Stone 1992, p.18). Crew himself has admitted to wanting 'to appeal to teenagers' "ookiness" and being fascinated by the sense of 'other' found in horror novels such as those by Stephen King

(Nieuwenhuizen 1990, p.4). Certainly these qualities have immediate appeal to teenage readers but *Strange Objects* is more than just a riveting story combining intrigue, suspense and elements of the macabre. The scope of this novel with its multiplicity of possible meanings, makes it stand out as one of the most sophisticated texts in Australian adolescent literature today.

As in his other novels, literary allusions abound in Crew's *Strange Objects*. Stephen Messenger, the self-absorbed social misfit who is the protagonist in the novel, attends Hamelin High School, a name suggestive of the Pied Piper and young people being led to their doom within the context of a story incorporating betrayal and revenge. At the beginning of the novel the students from Hamelin High, including Messenger, are 'led' into a cave as part of their school excursion and it is here that Stephen finds the 'cannibal pot' and other artefacts, most notably the ring, which lead to his disappearance. Jan Pelgrom, the young Dutch sailor aboard the ill-fated 'Batavia', is also led to his 'doom' by his superior, the evil Jeronimus Cornelius, who oversaw the callous and senseless murder of innocent survivors, including children, of the shipwreck. Item 10 of the

'Messenger Documents' states that, 'Cornelius must have sounded like the Pied Piper.' (Crew 1990, p.43). It soon becomes clear to the reader, however, that Pelgrom was no mere innocent being led astray; his actions, as described by Wouter Loos in his diary, reveal him to be a chillingly malevolent and fundamentally evil character.

What makes Crew's allusion to the Pied Piper interesting is the way in which it involves the reader, quite subtly, from the very start, in a moral dilemma concerning innocence and guilt and the passing of judgement. Is the Pied Piper to be pitied or reviled? After all, he did rid the town of rats only to be betrayed by the townspeople of Hamelin; but then again, his abduction of innocent children must surely be condemned as an act of extreme revenge. This same uncomfortable ambivalence is felt towards many characters in the novel - Messenger, Kratz, Wouter Loos, even Dr. Hope Michaels - and even extends beyond the narrative to the sense of collective guilt felt by many Australians about white settlement and its effect on Aborigines, both past and present. Alice Mills claims that,

*Strange Objects thus proceeds by eliciting a series of incompatible moral judgements from both the*

reader and various narrators and commentators within the text, so bringing into the foreground the process of judging and assigning guilt ... Such a double bind, guilt for judging and guilt for not judging, is a principal source of ironic pleasure or discomfort, depending on the reader's belief system. (Mills 1993, p.200)

The novel also includes references to popular culture in the form of the mysterious James Dean figure (Stephen's alter-ego or *doppelganger*), and the mention of 'Star Wars' and alien invaders. Christian allusions are contained in such names as 'Stephen', a martyr, and Dr. Hope Michaels, 'hope' being a Christian virtue and Michael being the archangel who confronted the devil; certainly the name 'Messenger' has connotations of one who has something to convey, something of importance to communicate.

And what is this 'message' Stephen Messenger has to pass on to us? This can be answered, in part, by looking at the structure of the novel which consists of a pastiche of 'documents' including reports, letters, diary entries, newspaper articles and Messenger's own accounts of the events. This is all presented in such an official and convincing way, citing sources

and giving references, that it encourages the reader to accept it as real, especially as some of the information provided regarding the 'Batavia' actually exists. Crew uses this format to deliberately shake the very foundations of our perceptions of 'history'. There are so many conflicting ideas and pieces of information that the reader begins, quite rightly, to question each character and event.

One of the first casualties is the traditionally held notion of a trustworthy first-person narrator: Stephen's motives and intentions become increasingly suspect as the story unfolds, as do those of Kratz, Wouter Loos and even Dr. Hope Michaels. All these characters are potential manipulators of 'history'. In a letter to Stephen, Dr. Michaels says:

*You can't treat history as if it were an object you put in a glass case, or hand over to relatives when you die. History is a living thing, changing and growing through each fresh contact with humanity.* (Crew 1990, p.54)

Crew himself has said that the novel was meant to say, 'Watch out! Take care of how you read things.' (Nieuwenhuizen 1990, p.4). The letter to the Editor by 'Sceptic' reinforces this by suggesting that Wouter Loos

consciously manipulates 'history' by presenting himself as noble and virtuous in his journal (Crew 1990, p.72). The reader is left with a strong sense of the subjectivity of history, how unknowable it is and how it can be open to a multitude of interpretations.

Linking the history of the past and present, the 'happened' and the 'happening', is the symbol of the ring, a signifier of power and potency, particularly if the text is read as fantasy genre. Both Pelgrom and Messenger come to possess the ring and are possessed by it, although it is hard to decide if the ring itself is evil or whether it simply amplifies the evil within the wearer; it is interesting to note that the ring displays no power when covered by wax on the dead girl's hand. Charlie, the old Aborigine, tells Messenger and Kratz he has 'seen' them both before in the rock paintings up in the mountains; when Messenger see these paintings, presumably of Pelgrom and Loos, the significance of the ring as a link between the past and present is clear:

*The little one seemed to be wearing pants. But the big one was amazing. He had no clothes and there was no doubt he was a 'he'. His legs were wide apart, his arms were raised high, as if he was doing a star jump. He was*

*smiling, as I said, and around his white hair was yellow paint, like a halo, and I saw one hand, the right one, had scratched on its little finger the circle of a ring.* (Crew 1990, p.156)

It is the ring which seems to transform both Jan and Steven, imbuing them with supernatural powers; they are weak, physically diseased and emotionally disturbed (one a possible schizophrenic, the other a psychopath), but the ring seems to make others perceive them as God-like (hence the halo effect), all powerful, almost omnipotent. It operates as a kind of 'inverted mandala, bringing disharmony and disintegration.' (Saxby 1993, p.700).

The ring symbol is open to many interpretations. Its perfect circular shape could represent wholeness and totality or a sort of bondage, an imprisonment within a form with no beginning or end. Lawrence Bourke describes it as 'a symbol of fullness with absence at the centre, an absence that invites people to occupy it in order to possess the fullness (suggestive among other things of the colonial appropriation of Australia as *terra nullius*).' (Bourke 1993, p.44). Crew himself hints at a similar idea when he states that in order to discover our past,

'we must search among the absences, the seemingly bright and airy places, wherein dance the illusive dust motes of memory.' (Crew 1992, p.27)

Other important symbols in the novel include the 'cannibal pot', a misnomer suggestive of the ignorance of white settlers about the Aborigines. Dr. Colin Paterson explains in a newspaper article that there is evidence of cannibalism among white Europeans but not Australian Aborigines and that this cannibal myth is a 'prejudicial view' just as harmful now as it was back then (Crew 1990, p.101). Found within this pot were the mummified hand, which functions as a metaphor for the dead but preserved past, and the leather-bound journal of Wouter Loos, a symbol of the enduring power (albeit suspect) of the written word, our European mode of recording history as opposed to the less dominant oral tradition of the Aborigines.

The 'Shining Hills' Wouter Loos longs to reach are El Dorado-like in their promise of great wealth, indicative of the kind of attitude which sought to exploit the landscape rather than to understand and appreciate it. Stephen Messenger's 'Life Frame', a wire construction designed to encase an animal (probably a

lizard) so it could be eaten alive by meat ants thereby leaving just the perfect skeleton, gives a frightening insight into how his mind operates but it also hints at a particular way of seeing, a method of looking beyond the surface to see the real workings. Stephen says Charlie could see straight through him, 'through my school uniform to my skin and bones beneath' (Crew 1990, p.23); the other Stephen, the James Dean figure, is described as having a 'second skin' (p.95); and the alien invaders in Messenger's comic book also disguise themselves under a false skin (p.93). As well as introducing elements of the supernatural perhaps Crew is also reminding us to look beyond the superficial, that all may not be as it seems, especially 'history'. The enigmatic nature of its symbolism is just one of the many appeals of *Strange Objects*.

Gary Crew's next novel, *No Such Country*, draws heavily on Christian symbolism and religious allusions. The inside title page describes it as 'A Book of Antipodean Hours', a reference firmly linking it to the ornate and richly illustrated medieval *Book of Hours of the Virgin*. As would be expected of an Antipodean version, most things are turned on their head: the land of New Canaan is

nothing like the Canaan of the Old Testament, the Promised Land given by God to Abraham for his obedience. The Father, dressed all in white, is a sinister figure who rules over the small fishing village with an iron hand, recording the past and trying to shape the future in his not-so-Holy Book. The Father, a symbol of European domination, wields power over the town because of their dark secret, the massacre of Aborigines, entrapped in the nets of the drunken fishermen, drowned and then buried in a huge pit by the women of the village. Sam, the illegitimate child of The Father and a young Aborigine girl he has raped, comes to the town as an anthropology student to both literally and metaphorically dig up his past. In the end The Father and his Angel (Angelo Rossellini) are destroyed in an Armageddon-like volcanic eruption. The story finishes on a hopeful note, however, with Sam coming to terms with his past and realising he must move on in order to have a future.

No Such Country can certainly be enjoyed without a knowledge of the Bible but knowledge of it provides an enhanced appreciation. The chapter headings (The Nativity, Massacre of the Innocents, Atonement), the characters' names (Samuel, Rachel,

Miriam, Sarah), the occupations (fishermen), and symbols such as those of the net cast wide to catch the sinners, are all so deeply embedded in Christian religious doctrine that they can't be separated from it. The book is steeped in irony: it is Sam, not The Father, who is Christ-like in his forgiveness and when Jesus, the fisher of men, cast his nets they were 'filled with the sinners that he saved' (Crew 1991, p.106) not filled with innocents who had been destroyed. The richness and density of the imagery and symbolism of this novel deserve a much more detailed analysis than this paper can provide, but it is interesting to note that again we find echoes of another Randolph Stow novel, *To the Islands*, in which a Christian missionary, Heriot, seeks personal atonement and salvation by being buried on the site of another Aboriginal massacre, one which actually took place at Forrest River Mission in Western Australia during the 1920's. Both Crew and Stow seek to capture the uneasiness of the white Australian in a land which he does not understand, a newcomer whose emptiness of the soul will always be reflected in the vast, unknowable landscape.

Biblical allusions are also found in Crew's next novel, *Angel's Gate*, yet again reminding us of

the author's own strict religious upbringing in the Christadelphian Church. The novel's epigraph states, 'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.' (Crew 1993). This caution urging brotherhood sets the scene for a story about the lack of tolerance and understanding so-called 'civilised' people exhibit towards those who are different. The town of Jericho (a reference to the Biblical city whose walls were sent a-tumbling by trumpet blasts to make way for God's chosen ones) is alive with rumours and mysterious tales of two 'feral' children missing since the murder of their father, a drunken old gold-fossicker. The older girl, Colleen, is captured and held at The Laurels, the residence of the local doctor and his family; her younger brother, Mickey is found later. The doctor's son, Kim (a far remove from Kipling's jungle boy), is the narrator of the story; he and his sister Julia are meant to represent the tame and the civilised, in contrast to the wild and untamed Flannagan children, Colleen and Mickey. The narrative is propelled by the desire to find out who killed old man Flannagan, the murderer Colleen will only refer to as 'Mister', a sinister and shadowy figure.

The novel operates quite successfully as a classic 'who-dunnit' with elements of the Gothic introduced by way of the 'haunted' house and references to madness and murder and betrayal. There is also the sub-text which explores the issues of freedom and the effects of civilisation. The reader is meant to question whether the Flannagan children were worse off before they were part of the civilised world, or after when they are taken away by Welfare like trapped animals. Kim says, 'My last sight of them was through the rear window of the station wagon. They didn't wave. Their fingers gripped the bars of the metal grille that was fitted there.' (Crew 1993, p.268).

This conventionally structured text lacks the complexity of Crew's previous novels because he slips back into a simple pattern of binary opposites which contain implicit hierarchies - wild/tame, civilised/uncivilised, freedom/imprisonment. This failure to explore or suggest the meaning of the spaces in between and the way these opposites might undermine each other, is in sharp contrast to *Strange Objects* and a major weakness of the novel. The symbolism in this text tends to be laboured and contrived at times. There are many references to flight in the form of eagles and bats

along with Kim's fascination for his 'eyrie', an observatory on the roof of The Laurels. Julia's calls of, 'Would you fly, Kimmy? Would you?', both at the beginning and end of the novel (p.5, p.274), are calls for freedom, calls to cast off the restraints and fly, unfettered. Kim's leatherwork teacher, Mr. D'Arcy, comments, 'So we have a flyer, have we?', when Kim says he wants to feature an eagle or a bat on his piece of leather (Crew 1993, p.102). One wonders if Kim will ever realise his dreams of flight, however, or whether he is destined to be forever earth-bound, the meek, obedient follower of convention. Will his attempts to fly be thwarted, as they were when a bout of tonsillitis stopped him from playing Peter Pan (an apt part) in the school play?

His sister Julia seems the one who might 'fly' as she is rebellious and tries to resist (unsuccessfully it would seem) her parents' efforts to 'lock her up' in a boarding school for young ladies. Crew clearly wants the reader to see Julia in the same light as the wild, untamed and uncivilised Flannagan children, by having her comment, 'They get all of us sooner or later', when referring to the capture of Colleen. The reader can't help but wonder at this comparison as Julia doesn't exhibit

behaviour very much different to any average teenager and certainly doesn't warrant the label of 'wild child', by any stretch of the imagination. If defying society means wearing a revealing red dress and wanting to leave school early to get a job, then this is a very tame form of rebellion indeed. Other examples of the rather too-obvious symbolism are the camphor laurel trees in Kim's front yard, one which was destroyed because it grew too fast and 'threatened to knock the wall down' and the other that survived because it grew up and then out, its branches reaching free of the wall because it was 'smarter, Julia said.' (Crew 1993, p.6).

Then there are the stuffed (literally and semiotically) creatures of flight, the eagle and the ghost bat, which form part of the doctor's taxidermy collection. Kim's fascination with fossils is no doubt meant to awaken thoughts on 'the origins of species' and make the reader ponder on the value (or otherwise) of culture and human civilisation. While still an interesting book in many ways, this particular reader couldn't help but be disappointed by *Angel's Gate*, a view shared by Heather Scutter who writes, 'Angel's Gate may be bringing us a message, but I think it is a warning: we should be wary of



entertaining strange texts which turn out to be very familiar after all.' (Scutter 1993, p.18).

Crew's novels, taken as a whole, represent a formidable and highly literary contribution to Australian adolescent literature. Gary Crew is a consummate story-teller and his novels are an excellent way to introduce young readers to important elements of style and literary techniques while at the same time immersing them in the wonderfully rich world of English literature. Because of his popular appeal his novels provide an important link between contemporary literature and the traditional classics which some students find difficult to master. While first-time readers may find much that is new and strange in his work, those of us who seek to share Crew's magic with these young people will delight in discovering and re-discovering all that is familiar.

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#### Biographical Note

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