

# Teachers' Notes by Fran Knight

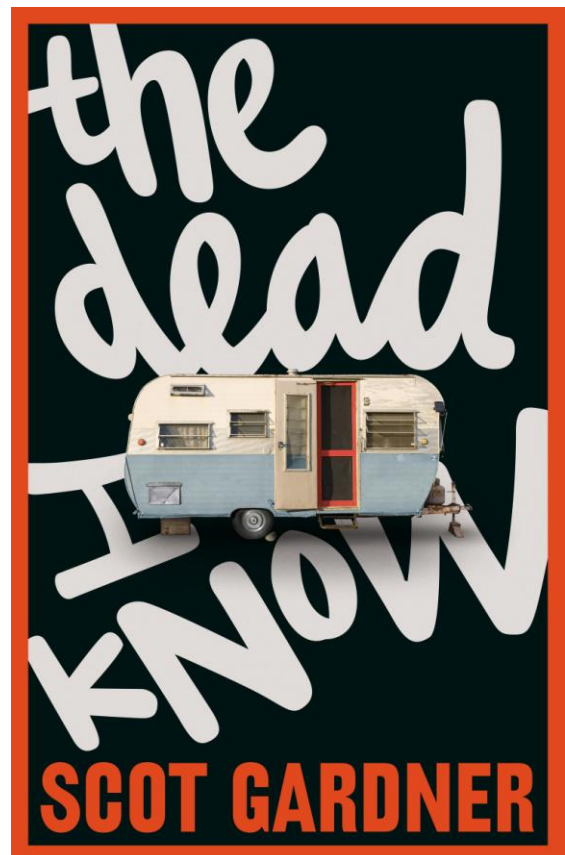
## The Dead I Know

by  
**Scot Gardner**

ISBN 978 1 74237 384 3  
Recommended for ages 14+

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **SYNOPSIS**

Scot Gardner's latest book celebrates life: the affirming nature of life and its paradoxes and idiosyncrasies; of family and the power of friendship, love and trust; and how the past affects us in ways often unacknowledged. But, above all, it is a tale of a young man finding his way. As with all of Scot Gardner's books the writing is exquisite, eliciting tears, laughter and wonder all in the same sentence, dragging the reader into the story and the lives of the characters without even being aware of it.

Aaron, a school drop out, finds employment at the local funeral home. He is immediately hired by the director, despite his long hair, scruffy appearance and lack of communication skills. The director, John Barton, sees in him qualities that others cannot and initiates some small physical changes to make Aaron more acceptable to his clientele. He encourages him to speak and, more importantly, supports him when he first comes in contact with the work at hand. He is a model employer, respectful of Aaron's initial difficulties with handling a dead body, supportive of him when he needs to get away, and he does all this because he is aware that Aaron, unlike others he has employed, knows about death.

Over the course of the novel, Aaron deals with a number of deaths: several old people dying in an aged care home; a man dying at home; a young girl who suicides; and a motorcycle accident. Through these deaths Aaron reveals more of himself. He lives in the caravan park with Mam, a relative who is becoming more difficult as she forgets things and has major mood swings, several times accidentally injuring herself. One night Mam breaks her arm and Aaron must take her to hospital, but he is frightened of seeing authorities and of them seeing Mam. He enlists help from John Barton, who without question is supportive and helpful.

Aaron has a major problem with nightmares and sleepwalking and a number of times throughout the story he finds himself in odd places, places that have some link to whatever he has been worrying about in the days before. Through sleepwalking he meets a range of supportive people, police officers and paramedics and although Aaron is reticent, he is treated well because people know that he is working for John Barton.

At the caravan park is a family whom he avoids. The son is a boy he knew at school, a thug who deals drugs and accuses Aaron of stealing money from his van. His presence is a continual threat to Aaron, but when he is killed, it is Aaron who is arrested and thrown into jail. It is John Barton who again comes to his rescue, taking him home to stay with his wife and daughter, the odd little girl, Skye, who dotes on Aaron.

All of the themes: death, family, dementia, sleepwalking, workplace and friendship, combine to make a wonderfully evocative and positive novel, a story about death but really heralding life and its possibilities. This would be a superb class text for students in low to mid secondary school, or would be an ideal small set when doing a literature circle about death, mental illness or growing up.

### **AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM**

The new Australian Curriculum has been used as the basis for these notes. The English curriculum has three strands, Language, Literature and Literacy, so these notes are divided into activities for class and individual work reflecting these three strands. A Literature Circle allows for classes to further explore similar novels and others by Scot Gardner.

Find out more about the English Curriculum: <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Home>

You will need to register an email address and password.

## LITERACY: WHAT IS THE NOVEL ABOUT?

### AS YOU READ THE NOVEL: *THE DEAD I KNOW*

#### Class Activity

Have a worksheet with a grid of 36 spaces ready (one for each chapter). As students read the novel, they can add the main events and important character(s) in each chapter. A large version can be displayed in the classroom for students to add to as they read.

On the back of the worksheet, provide space for the class to write down questions they have as they read. They may have questions about the funeral industry, or the deaths in the novel, or dementia, or life in a caravan park!

### WHEN THE NOVEL IS FINISHED

- Brainstorm all the questions the students have
- Have them displayed on the electronic whiteboard or display board
- Check out the ones that can be answered in the class, or need further investigation (some may be in the work following)
- Can these questions be answered by outside visits or experts coming in to the classroom?
- How can the students find answers to their questions?

#### Class Activity: What is the novel about?

Ask this question of the class, and tabulate the results.

Is there a difference between themes, issues, plot and what it is about?

Divide the class into smaller groups. Each group is to take one of the topics in the table below to discuss and report back to the class.

What is the novel about?	What is the plot of the novel?	What are its themes?	What ideas are discussed in this novel?
What are the issues raised in the novel?	Why did Gardner write this novel?	Did you enjoy the novel? Why?	Which character gained your sympathy? Why?

## LITERACY: THEMES

### DEATH

Death is a prominent theme in this book. Set mainly in a funeral home, Aaron is hired by the funeral director, John Barton, as his assistant. Aaron's working life revolves around picking up bodies from retirement or aged care homes, the hospital, the morgue or people's houses, helping get the body ready for the funeral, assembling the coffin, cleaning the cool room and the funeral home and attending the funeral.

During the course of the novel, Aaron must deal with seven bodies brought into the home, at the same time as dealing with deaths in his own family (which have had an enormous and largely unacknowledged impact on his life), the death of the funeral director's cat and the effect on Barton's daughter, and a death in the Barton family. Each death reveals something

about Aaron and his character, as well as informing the reader about the industry and about the different ways in which people are affected by death.

**Class Activities: while the novel is being read**

- Is it possible to have a celebrant or a funeral director speak to the class? A student may like to organise this.
- Is it possible to visit a funeral home to see what happens there?
- Is it possible to have a police officer visit the class to talk about road safety?

**Student worksheet task: Death in the funeral home (Blackline Master #1)**

Students to complete this worksheet as they read the novel.

Death	Chapter	How did the person die?	What do we learn about Aaron?
Mrs Carmel Gray	3		
Mr Neville Cooper	4		
Mr Terrence Arthur Dean	7		
Amanda Creen	9		
Motorcycle accident	16		
Karl Stevens	19		
Campbell baby	30		

**Discuss the following after completing the above worksheet**

- 1 What does each death reveal about Aaron?
- 2 Why do you think Gardner shows such a range of deaths?
- 3 What does each death reveal about the funeral process?
- 4 What do we learn about the funeral industry from this book?
- 5 Some small criticisms occur about some things in the funeral industry. What are they?
- 6 Mr John Barton has his own routines that make the process formal and respectful. Discuss these routines and why he might use them.
- 7 One of the deaths affects Aaron more closely than the others. Which one is this, what impact did it have on Aaron and why do you think it had such an impact?
- 8 A comparison is drawn between two of the celebrants and the way they conduct the service. Read each relevant chapter again, and discuss which you would choose as a celebrant for a family funeral and why.

### **Class Research: The Funeral Industry**

<http://www.blackwellfunerals.com.au/driver.asp> (Blackwell Funerals)

<http://www.simplicityfunerals.com.au/> (Simplicity Funerals)

<http://www.whiteladyfunerals.com.au/> (White Lady Funerals)

Each site gives an outline of the services offered, and so is worth scrolling through the site for information to support what the class is reading in the novel.

### **Group activity: The Funeral Industry**

Check out one of the websites for a funeral home (three listed above, but there are many more) Students may like to work in a small group to do this activity

Can you collect some brochures from a funeral home for comparison?	Look closely at the wording of the site. List the words particular to this industry.	Is there any mention of cost? How would clients find out about the cost?	Check particularly the setup of the home page, who is it aimed at?
What extra information would you want?	What detail do you think is unnecessary?	Can you find out about the cost of a funeral?	What extras does this site offer?
What did you not expect to see on this site?	Does the site offer grief counselling?	How does the site refer to the dead relative?	What services are offered by this company?

### **MENTAL ILLNESS**

Mam is obviously suffering from some sort of illness. Aaron is caring for her as best as he can, but now that he has work, it has become more difficult Part way through the novel, a nurse talks to Aaron about Mam having dementia. It is the first time her condition has been put into words, and Aaron feels a sort of relief that now people know. Up until this point he has cared for her himself, fooling himself that she will get better, shielding her from prying eyes.

- Use the electronic whiteboard to access the Wikipedia website about Dementia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dementia>
- Acquaint the students with facets of this disease, its stages and behaviours.
- Brainstorm the place where we are first made aware that there is something wrong with Mam.

### **Class activity: Dementia (Blackline Master #2)**

Put students into small groups to skim read the relevant chapters and fill in the following worksheet.

Chapter	What happens?	What do we learn about Mam and Aaron?
6	Aaron finds Mam shopping, watches TV, calls him David	
8	Aaron finds Mam in the park toilet, bleeding	
9	Aaron is called David	
11	Aaron finds Mam with the park manager who warns him about her	
13	We learn a little of Mam's background	
15	Aaron overhears people talking	
18	Mam breaks her arm	
19	At hospital, Aaron tries to take her home	
21	Hospital	
23	Hospital	
25	Hospital	
27	Nurse uses the word <i>dementia</i>	

**Class discussion: after filling out the worksheet in groups, discuss the following questions**

- 1 What extra effort does Aaron do to support and protect Mam?
- 2 What clues does Gardner give the reader as to Mam's condition?
- 3 What do we know of her background?
- 4 When all is revealed at the end of the novel, what impact do you think this may have had on Mam?
- 5 Why does Aaron go to such lengths to protect her?
- 6 What help could he have accessed?
- 7 How do we know that Mam knows that something is happening to her?

**WORKPLACE**

An amazing backdrop to this story is the insider look at the funeral industry through Aaron's eyes.

**Individual activity**

- 1 If you were Aaron, how would you have coped with your first day at work?
- 2 What did Aaron learn in his first day at work?

- 3 Why do you think that John Barton took such care over teaching Aaron and supporting him in this new work?
- 4 What is there about the funeral industry that Aaron likes?
- 5 What does he find difficult when working at the funeral home?
- 6 How does Aaron overcome his difficulties?
- 7 Imagine Aaron writes a letter to his student counselor, who warned John Barton against employing him. Tell the counselor how much he is enjoying the work and what it is about the work that is so much better than school (300 words)

**Group activity**

- List the things John Barton teaches Aaron in the first few days at work.
- Has this been your experience at a workplace?
- Why might this workplace be different?

**FAMILY**

Two very different families are presented in this book, but in the end, they find they have a lot in common.

**Class activity: Comparing the two families (Blackline Master #3)**

	Rowe family	Barton family
Family members		
What each member does		
Housing		
Work		
Interests		
Values		
Travel		
Good/bad points		
Past events which have an impact on their lives		
Future		

In small groups, discuss each family with an eye to the damage each has endured.

- What impact has death played in these families' lives and how has each family dealt with it?
- What has happened that has brought the families closer together?

# LANGUAGE

## CHARACTERISATION

### **Class Activity: Characters in the novel**

- Brainstorm the characters in the novel, including those who have died
- List all of these people on the whiteboard.

### **Group activity: Characters**

Each small group is to take one or two characters from the novel, and reread the chapters where they appear, jotting down information about them. Discuss how sympathetic the author has made this character. Several we are led to dislike, while many we like.

- Make an outline of one character as if you are describing him/her for an article. Include physical description, work, where he/she lives, clothing, attitudes and ideas, ...
- Write an obituary of one of those who have died. (150 words)

### ***What if?* Discuss the following with your group**

What if Aaron had not been employed by John Barton?	What if John Barton's baby had lived?	What if Mam was a 'normal' grandmother?	What if Aaron still lived with his parents?
What if Westie had not been a drug user?	What if the police officers had not realised who Aaron was?	What if Aaron and his family did not live in a caravan park?	What if the hospital staff had not been sympathetic to Aaron?

Some students may like to write an outline of a different ending or plot outline which includes some of the options talked about above.

## WORDS

Words associated with death are used regularly in this novel.

### **1. As the class reads the novel, add any words associated with death to a list on the display board, or in their notebooks or worksheets.**

Gather the words into groups:

- words to do with the funeral process
- words to do with grief
- words to do with the preparation of the body for the funeral
- add any other words associated with death that the students know
- list words that mean death now prevalent in books, TV shows or movies (eg snuffed, blown away etc) (synonyms)

### **2. There are many words used to define the body (the dead, deceased, body etc)**

- List all the ones the class has come across



- Compare the list with that written by the Monty Python team in the famous Parrot sketch, which is easily accessed on the Internet <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npjOSLCR2hE>

### 3. How do different media deal with death?

- Look at a range of newspaper articles and note how the journalist describes the dead person in the report.
- Watch the television coverage of an incident and jot down the way it talks about the person who has died.
- Can you see a difference between the way deaths are reported?
- Compare this with the obituaries published in the local paper.

### 4 Try it yourself

- Write an obituary for one of the dead characters in the novel, *The Dead I Know*.
- Some students may like to write a newspaper article about the death of Dale West.
- Put the obituaries and the report alongside each other.
- How different are these pieces of writing? Look at the choice of words, the descriptions and overall tone.

## SAYINGS AND IDIOMS

### Class work: *Don't judge a book by its cover*

Find the saying about judging a book by its cover.	What is the correct wording for this saying?	What does the saying mean?	Do you know of any similar sayings?
Where was it first used? (a good dictionary or website will tell you this)	Can you think of instances where this saying could be apt? Give an example.	Have a second look at places in the novel where this saying can be applied.	Can you think of instances where this applies to Aaron? (See examples in next row.)
Chapter 8 tells of Aaron in the caravan park.	In Chapter 8, Skye innocently says what people think of those who live in a caravan park.	In Chapter 18, the taxi refuses to pick up Aaron and Mam.	In Chapter 29, Aaron tells the paramedic where he lives, and is almost not believed.
Why do some people think ill of Aaron and Mam?	What is it about John Burton that makes people think better of Aaron?	What is there about Aaron that makes the police officers think he is not worth the effort?	Does the saying 'clothes maketh the man' have any bearing on how people view Aaron?

## LITERATURE

### THE AUTHOR : SCOT GARDNER

Scot Gardner is a full-time writer, living in rural Victoria. In a past life he worked in schools with students with little inclination to attend. He has worked with young men and Aboriginal youth, and disadvantaged and high-risk teens. As a counsellor, he has had first-hand experience from which he's drawn heavily to create some of the memorable characters within his books. Scot has been involved in creating programs for these young people, and as a result has been heavily booked by schools and other institutions where an informed, energetic speaker is needed.

For more information about this author, websites such as [http://www.bookedout.com.au/authors/Scot\\_Gardner/index.html](http://www.bookedout.com.au/authors/Scot_Gardner/index.html) are invaluable. Booked Out is a booking agency for authors and so gives a detailed but concise blurb about his achievements.

Websites of the publishers also have author information and links to other sites.

Pan Macmillan <http://www.panmacmillan.com.au>

Allen & Unwin <http://www.allenandunwin.com/>

But the best website is that of Scot Gardner himself, and is candid and open <http://www.scotgardner.com/> This website gives

- information about Scot and his life and family, his writing experiences, and tips on how to write
- information about all of his books
- a blog
- upcoming books
- teachers notes

### Task

After reading *The Dead I Know*, set your students one of the following tasks to do with the author and his writing. Use the above websites.

Draw up a list of questions you would like to ask Scot Gardner that relate to the novel you have just read	Check out Scot Gardner's blog to see what other questions people have asked about this novel.	Are there clues in his childhood that may have given rise to some parts of this novel?
Are there hints that the novel was written by a teacher?	What in Scot Gardner's background as a teacher is relevant to this novel?	Is there a YouTube trailer for <i>The Dead I Know</i> ?
Click onto Scot Gardner's blog. Read through one of the entries, and tell someone else in your class about it.	Read the blurbs of his other novels, and make a brief list of those that may have some connections with <i>The Dead I Know</i> .	What parts of the novel may be taken from Gardner's experiences?
Go to Rants, and read one of them. What sort of person do you think Scot Gardner is?	Compile a list of words to describe Scot Gardner after reading one of his Rants.	Read the Rant called 'Chopping wood and carrying water', to list what Scot Gardner says about writing.

## THINKING OUTSIDE THE SQUARE

### CEMETERY VISIT

Cemeteries are fascinating places. Gravestones sometimes show an incredible amount of information, not only in the inscription, but in the shape, decoration, position and size of the headstone itself.

#### Visit your local cemetery

Perhaps ring, email or check a website to see if there are any self guided brochures available, or a tour guide (this may cost money).

Self guided walks often point out the unusual or odd grave, or those of people of note. In West Terrace Cemetery in Adelaide, for example is a grave of a woman whose claim to fame is that her grandparents were guillotined with Louis XVI, and nearby is a pitiful headstone of a couple who buried their 9 children (all listed).

There are fascinating reasons for the decorations on headstones. Anchors, crosses and sheep all represent the belief that the dead will go to heaven. Rosemary, roses, and forget-me-nots represent the family's undying love and devotion to the memory of the person who has died. A broken cross or column represents a life cut short and is usually used for a child's grave. Look around the cemetery for different decorations such as chains, clasped hands, bibles, or the more elaborate statues. Similarly the epitaphs can be revealing. Some warn the passers by that they may be next!

### OBITUARIES

- Collect some obituaries from your local paper. Assess the point of view of the author. Is it a family member, work colleague, friend? How do you know this?
- Select the death of a well known identity from the paper. Research what that person has done in their life. What sort of things would you include in this person's obituary? What is important to you? Is this what was important to the person who has died? Why is there a difference?

### BURIAL

Some people may be interested in the way bodies are buried. For many years, cremation was frowned upon, and yet now, this seems to be the way many bodies are disposed of. But there is now a push for 'natural' burials, or vertical burials.

- Look again at the way the bodies are disposed of in *The Dead I Know*.
- Can statistics be found about how our society disposes of its dead?
- Some students may like to look at the history of cremation as a funeral practice.
- And some may like to look at the modern changes to the way people are thinking about disposal of the dead.
- Still others may like to research the future of cemeteries. They are often prime land and many of the older ones are filling up fast. What options are there for cemeteries in the future? Some in your area may have already been altered. Have a look at how they have changed over the years. (your local council may be of help here)

### AGED CARE OR NURSING HOMES

The image of nursing homes or aged care homes is still very poor, but many are well kept, supportive and caring places.

- Some students may like to make a special study of a nursing home in their community.
- A group may like to brainstorm a list of questions to ask the person in charge, or aspects to see as they tour the place.
- Some students may have an aged relative in a nursing home and may like to share their experiences.
- Review the chapters in the novel which deal with the nursing home in Aaron's community. How does the author view the nursing home in this book?
- Some students may like to plan a new nursing home for their suburb.
- Some students may like to look at the statistics about the need for aged care in Australia today. What are governments doing about the growing aged care needs in our community?
- Aged Care is a growth industry. How do we know this?

### ***SIX FEET UNDER***

Some students may have watched this TV series from HBO.

Some small groups may like to watch an episode to compare it with the novel *The Dead I Know*. Episode One (the pilot episode) would be a good episode as it has some things which were not used again (the ads for funeral home requirements) and introduces viewers to the main characters.

#### **Ask the students to:**

- list the similarities and differences between the series and the book;
- note what the viewer would learn about the funeral industry from the TV series;
- compare the main characters and how they appeal to the viewer;
- say which format they prefer.

### ***THE AMERICAN WAY OF DEATH and THE LOVED ONE***

These two books by Jessica Mitford (*The American Way of Death* – non-fiction) and Evelyn Waugh (*The Loved One* – fiction) are celebrated and wickedly satirical exposés of the funeral industry in the United States. Though written several decades ago, many of their barbs still hit home. *The American Way of Death* is a classic piece of investigative and campaigning journalism, still studied in journalism courses – and also very, very funny! Great reading for teenagers with an interest in social issues and a ghoulish sense of humour.

## **ABOUT THE WRITERS**

### **SCOT GARDNER**

Scot wasn't born reading and writing; in fact, he left school in year eleven to undertake an apprenticeship in gardening with the local council. He has worked as a waiter, masseur, delivery truck driver, home dad, counsellor and musician.

Scot's first fiction for young readers, *One Dead Seagull*, was published after he attended a writing camp and writing conferences with John Marsden. Kids and critics loved the honesty and authenticity of Wayne Armond, a voice developed and inspired through years of counselling and group work with disaffected youth. Scot's many books since include *Burning Eddy*, shortlisted for a CBCA award and for the NSW Premier's literary award, and *The Legend of Kevin the Plumber*, a CBCA Notable Book.

Scot's hobbies include pushbikes and power kites, kayaking and taking photos of the world around him. He is licensed to handle explosives and venomous snakes and got an 8 out of 10 from Red Symons on *Hey, Hey, It's Saturday's* 'Red Faces'. He lives with his wife and children, two dogs and some chooks in the bush in Eastern Victoria and spends half the year writing and half the year on the road talking to mostly young people about his books and the craft of writing.

### **FRAN KNIGHT**

Fran is a retired teacher librarian who loves adolescent fiction. She speaks at conferences, writes teacher notes and has articles in *The Literature Base*, *Magpies*, *ACCESS* and *Viewpoint* and has reviewed since the 1970s for *Magpies* and *Fiction Focus*.

In 2005, her book, *Ngadjuri: Aboriginal peoples of South Australia's Mid North Region* was published, following 20 years of research. Pledger Consulting has published ten books which reflect Fran's reading, containing lists of books in subject headings.

Fran's contribution to teacher librarianship has been recognised with the South Australian Teacher Librarian of the Year awarded in 2005, and Honorary Life Membership of SLASA (School Library Association of South Australia) in 2007.

# DEATH IN THE FUNERAL HOME

Death is a prominent theme in *The Dead I Know*.

During the course of the novel, Aaron must deal with seven bodies brought into the home, at the same time as dealing with deaths in his own family. Each death reveals something about Aaron and his character, as well as giving us some insight into the funeral industry and about the different ways in which people are affected by death.

To prepare for a discussion of this theme, complete the following table:

Death	Chapter	How did the person die?	What do we learn about Aaron?	What do we learn about the funeral industry?
Mrs Carmel Gray	3			
Mr Neville Cooper	4			
Mr Terrence Arthur Dean	7			
Amanda Creen	9			
Motorcycle accident	16			
Karl Stevens	19			
Campbell baby	30			

# WHAT'S WRONG WITH MAM?

To prepare for a discussion about the theme of dementia, complete this table.

Chapter	What happens?	What do we learn about Mam and Aaron?
6	Aaron finds Mam shopping, watches TV, calls him David	
8	Aaron finds Mam in the park toilet, bleeding	
9	Aaron is called David	
11	Aaron finds Mam with the park manager who warns him about her	
13	We learn a little of Mam's background	
15	Aaron overhears people talking	
18	Mam breaks her arm	
19	At hospital, Aaron tries to take her home	
21	Hospital	
23	Hospital	
25	Hospital	
27	Nurse uses the word <i>dementia</i>	

# TWO FAMILIES

Compare and contrast the two main families in *The Dead I Know*.

	<b>Rowe family</b>	<b>Barton family</b>
<b>Family members</b>		
<b>What each member does</b>		
<b>Housing</b>		
<b>Work</b>		
<b>Interests</b>		
<b>Values</b>		
<b>Travel</b>		
<b>Good/bad points</b>		
<b>Past events which have an impact on their lives</b>		
<b>Future?</b>		