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## Old Drumble by Jack Lasenby

A classroom English unit from



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This is the latest title from one of New Zealand's most popular, prolific and much-loved children's writers. Jack Lasenby, deer culler, possum-trapper, primary school teacher, editor of the *New Zealand School Journal* and Teachers' College lecturer, believes passionately in the power of imagination. He is quoted as saying 'If the imagination doesn't grow, the intelligence doesn't grow.' *Old Drumble* will certainly stimulate the imagination and delight young readers with its forthright, honest, perceptive, vigorous and 'anti-bullshit' language that shows a rare insight into the innermost thoughts and imagination of a young boy. Most of all, readers (of any age) will just laugh out loud at the inspired madness and absurdity of the story, but will be delighted to suspend belief and enjoy these wonderful tall tales about Old Drumble. There can be no doubt he was the smartest drover's dog there ever was.

### Story synopsis

The story is set in Waharoa in the depression times of the 1930s when swaggers, men without work, walked the roads. It was also the time of the drover – an almost romantic character who moved large mobs of cattle and sheep around, sometimes through the unsealed roads of towns and settlements of New Zealand. In Waharoa, they come down the main street – the only street. Jack Jackman, a young boy, lives on Ward Street. During the long summer holidays he becomes fascinated by the regular stock drives and in particular with old Andy the drover, his three dogs and horse who who regularly pass through the town. Jack's mother always provides Andy with a cup of tea and bite to eat when he brings a mob through town. Jack is finally allowed to help Andy drive the stock through the town and for increasing distances at each successive drive. Jack is fascinated by Old Drumble, the lead dog, and Andy confides in Jack about the amazing exploits of the dog. He hears that Old Drumble has blindfolded steers and led them over a swollen river on a tightrope, completed a major pub crawl to try to cool his throat after eating very hot pumpkin, stops a flooded river to let the sheep over with a thunderous bark and can navigate all over New Zealand by the stars. And this is just some of it! As the tall tales get taller and taller, Jack blurts them out to his mother, whom Jack thinks displays similar abilities to Old Drumble – a keen eye and supernatural hearing. From the tales, Jack picks up the sometimes irreverent slang of the drover and although his mother feigns shock, she and Jack's father secretly enjoy seeing his imagination being stimulated. Just before Andy and Old Drumble are due to retire, they are tragically drowned when trying to cross a river. Luckily Jack knows that they both have really gone to a magic drovers' island to dance around a fire and drink whisky!

### Teaching and learning activities

- Discuss the meaning of slang. What is it? Why is it used and who uses it? Develop the idea that slang is a very colourful way of getting ideas across and can make story characters seem more believable. Ask students to write down what they think is meant by the following slang terms in the story: *whoppers*, *yafoos*, *run-in*, *shambles*, *possie* and *bosh*. Check the glossary for the meanings. How close did they get? Are any still in use today? Build up a list of the colourful slang used in the book. Brainstorm a list of slang words commonly in use today. Have students list words and phrases in the book that they are unfamiliar with. Discuss why language is always changing.
- Have students retell their favourite tall story from the book. Why did it appeal to them so much? Why do they think tall stories are always popular? Discuss the following statement: 'The taller the story, the more enjoyable it becomes.' Do they have a tall story to share that a family member has told them? Have each student develop and share an original tall story of their own about Old Drumble and/or about an animal that they know.
- Why do the students think that Mr and Mrs Jackman didn't tell Jack firmly that the stories that Andy told could not possibly be true? Do they think this was wise or could it have been a good way to develop Jack's imagination? Why do they think that using your imagination is a good thing? Discuss the important role of books in developing the imagination as opposed to films and computer games.
- Through discussion, contrast the roles of radio and television in stimulating the imagination. Using a sporting event as a topic, list the different roles a commentator has to play in each medium. In what ways do they differ? What skills must the commentator use in each medium? Have students prepare and deliver an on-the-spot radio broadcast of one of Old Drumble's memorable adventures.
- In groups, have each member play the role of one of the following: Mr Jackman, Mrs Dainty, Minnie Mitchell, Harry Jitters and a TV interviewer. Role-play a television interview where each one is asked to give their opinions about Jack and his story-telling.
- Organise and run a class tall-story-telling competition. Take a class vote on the stories. What criteria did students use to judge their favourite story? Feature the five best tall stories at a school assembly.

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