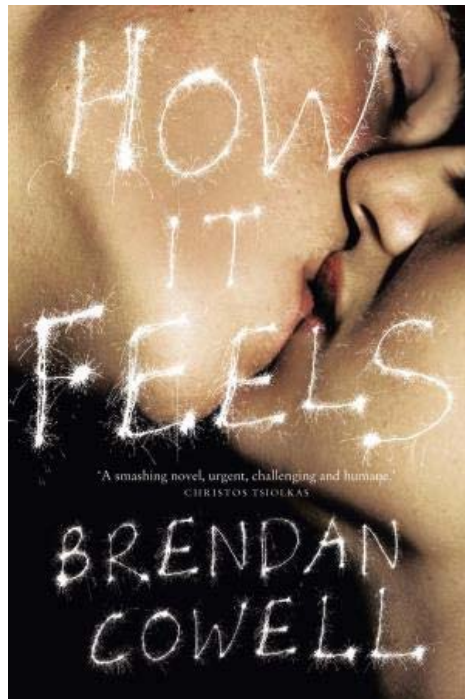


**PICADOR**  
**AUSTRALIA**

**NOTES FOR READING GROUPS**



**Brendan Cowell**



**HOW IT FEELS**

## Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

### CONTENTS:

- Thematic & Plot Summary
- Writing Style
- The Author
- Questions for Discussion

## THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'I had no idea how free we were. That's how free I was.' (p 33)

'He was right, my dad; not everything goes away.' (p 230)

This novel is a paean to the lost places of our youths, to the painful and joyful memories of that time, and a lament for the hard facts of life which life itself inevitably presents to us. Neil Cronk is a young man with theatrical ambitions and dreams, a childhood love which he never quite gets right, and two best mates whose lives are intertwined with his life, and with that of his girl. He's a man whose father has failed him and who therefore suspects that he will fail others in his turn. His journey involves the yearning attached to the dichotomous recognition that nothing ever stays the same, and that nothing we've done in life ever entirely leaves us. It's about the pain human beings wreak on each other and the need to accept that pain with dignity and grace, rather than anger and despair. An actor, writer and director by profession, Brendan Cowell the novelist presents life as a drama which unfolds in three acts, with many circuitous deviations. He leaves 'our hero' on the brink of another epiphany, about to embark on a new unknown chapter in his life. This 'portrait of an artist as a young man' is painfully honest, brutally frank, darkly humorous and infused with a passionate belief in the human spirit's ability to overcome despair and to embrace the light. This journey however is not without moments when the reader too despairs of Neil finding anything to make his life seem worthwhile. But in the end, it's the complex and exhilarating relationship between love and loss which reminds us of what makes a breath worth taking.

'It was a thrilling type of trauma; the final party of our school life, where everything would happen and nothing would be left behind.'(p 24) This novel begins in Part One, with Neil's final weeks at school when hard decisions have to be made. How can he tell his best friend Gordon that he plans to move in with his girlfriend Courtney and is choosing his tertiary options to suit her objectives, not his? How to tell his single mother that he's leaving her as well? And what happens when Courtney's plans suddenly don't match up with his at all, since he discovers a burning desire to attend a rural theatre college which offers nothing remotely like the inner city bohemian life they'd both dreamed of? Meanwhile Courtney's mother Nina is so grief stricken by the death of her son Tommy that her husband Eric leaves them, and Courtney feels that she needs to stay home after all. What will become of the wild Stuart, Neil's other best friend, without Neil as a buffer between he and Gordon? Neil spends his final days at school 'Wondering how not to hurt everyone with my future.'(p 49)

Neil's odyssey begins here and takes many twists and turns in ensuing years. In Part Two, we find him three years later having completed theatre studies in Bathurst, where he felt completely at home for the first time. 'Finally, after ten years of being labelled a 'wanker' or an 'arty-farty wanker' or an 'arty-farty wanker faggot' at school, I felt as regular as tasty cheese, shuffling down the corridor, eyes zipping over every inch of the building.'(p 26) And in Part Three, it's seven years later, and Neil has returned from triumph and loss in London where he lived with Swanna, for Courtney and Gordon's wedding day, and has come full circle to find himself back where he began. 'It might seem to my mother and father that I had withdrawn from life and work, 'given up' even, but there was so much happening inside, so much joy in my life, it was just quieter, and slower. I was rebuilding myself out here, a ferry ride from Cronulla, my old school in the distance, and this was the place to do it, with a bottle of Irish, in the mud and trees, with those mad-eyed little black and white bastards who lived this side of the bay.'(pp 226-7) He's older, but is still suffering from residual angst, and desperately needing to find a way to move forward with some sort of equanimity.

Masculinity and identity become ever more central thematically as this book evolves, and we follow Neil's journey from adolescence, rejection of home and childhood love, journey towards a promising theatrical career, loss of one of his best friends, loss of his second love and baby, and descent into addiction, and then recovery. He has unresolved issues with his father's departure, a tortured love for Courtney Gonzales, and equally passionate friendships with Stuart Stone and Gordon Braithwaite with whom he's locked

into both an embrace and a competition. Underlying all of this is the difficulty men often have in confronting the emotional depths which they clearly have, but choose to suppress. Neil and his mates constantly barter male insults and test each other's endurance. Stuart is the alpha male, like his father; he's the epitome of how men like to behave badly: 'Stuart was a different kind of warrior; instead of slaying wild boar in Africa, he preferred to suck piss and shoot magpies from the balcony with his shirt off, and, funnily enough, this was exactly what he was doing when we arrived.' (p 36) Neil has always felt abandoned by his father (just as Gordon has): 'But with my own failings in the time I had spent as a man, I saw he was not that bad after all. The whole thing of life was so hard to do right.' (p 228) Neil's father's new baby son Oscar's undisguised love for Neil is potentially hopeful. But his dad's failure to heed his plea to stay and hear his speech as best man at Gordon's wedding triggers the re-surfacing of Neil's pain. 'I felt gutted, but it sat familiar, a lifetime of exits just when I needed him most. And nothing would change it, not even Oscar with his chubby cheeks and golden spirit could fix this.' (p 334)

**As in all works of rites of passage, this novel is about the role played by parents, in our journey towards adulthood as we define ourselves against them.** 'There's an awful sense of *duty* involved with being a parent I reckon.' (p 57) Neil's mum is separated from his dad. Nina and Eric Gonzales separate after Tommy's death. Gordon has never known his dad. How divorce affects children is something which worries Nina, but Neil as a teenager disingenuously says that now he meets his dad and actually talks. 'And you know, the Sutherland Shire is pretty conservative; it's just *divorce* but still everyone tiptoes around me as if I'm some abuse victim or I've lost my ability to see, when I really haven't suffered at all. I was just relieved that the yelling had stopped, and I could finally get some sleep.' (p 15) Clearly though, as the novel progresses, each of these friends reveal how important their parents' relationships are in the decisions their children take in their later lives.

**Another aspect of teenage maturation is sex and love, and here Neil tries to resolve the tension between the ideal and reality.** Sexual metaphors and euphemisms litter this text in a dazzling array of inventiveness, as Neil grapples with his feelings for Courtney. He talks of the girls at school losing 'their peach' (p 7), his mother calls it 'the great intrusion' (p 7), and Stuart and Gordon use some very fruity language to describe the deed (p 1). At the novel's heart is Neil's love for Courtney but it is fraught by his sexual and emotional insecurities: 'The vagina, to me, was like one of those national parks the teachers led you into on orienteering day.' (p 9) His reluctance to consummate their love is founded on his suspicion that she only wants sex to help her forget the pain of losing her brother Tommy: 'I did not know how to fuck at all, let alone as therapy.' (p 8) He also harbours a secret obsession with her mother who is a vintage version of her daughter. Neil finally loses his virginity to a hooker named 'Larissa the Kisser' (pp 85-8) in a sad example of many young men's initiation: 'Courtney said sex should be like falling rain but it was hailing here, sharp black ice.' (p 88) He then spends his three years at uni engaging in lots of sex, living with the wild Chandra, before falling for a first year: 'Swanna was a taste-maker in her own right and I adored everything that fell out of her heart, her mind, her hands.' (p 222) But the power of first love is so strong that years later Neil observes of Swanna: 'I knew then she was not entirely comfortable about Courtney and me, as if she sensed there was something still moving there.' (p 237) Her miscarriage brings things between them to a head; he turns to Courtney for comfort; he and Swanna break up in a devastating scene (p 280) and he heads home, fleeing from 'all that hell and loss. No bath could wash the last seven years off, and in a way, well, as ugly as it felt, I liked it on my skin.' (p 221) Throughout this, though, despite the attraction between them, every time he meets Courtney he pulls back and resists her, suggesting that he has never reconciled love and sex in his own heart.

**Struggling with peer group pressure and establishing both an identity and supportive friendships are further aspects of teenage growth.** 'If adolescence was a war zone then fashion and music were both protection and artillery, they kept us safe and offered us a position to fire ourselves from.' (p 72) Youth is a time of insecurity, and a need to be or to seem different or special. eg Sarah Kirkwood's desperate attempts to impress her peers (p 66). Neil, too, finds making friends difficult because of his artistic tendencies, but when the lonely Gordon arrives in Year 8, Neil feels an instant kinship with him. 'With cool abandon we threw our individual worlds to the side and built our own composite. With his broad shoulders and my broad mind we climbed into each other's lives, hiding nothing and

embracing all. ' (p 30) Neil gives Gordon a safe haven: 'He was just overwhelmed, like how a dog moans all crazy when it lands on a beach and feels all the space and water around it.' (p 31) But Stuart has always hovered around Neil's life and so alters the dynamic between them, making them a cool threesome (p 31). Later he becomes a serious drug, sex and party addict but the bond remains firm: 'I didn't care if I was sitting in piss or whatever. I thought about what Stuart had just told me, asked me. He had asked me to join him and it thrilled me. I don't know why but it did. He wanted me with him, even there. There was theatre in it and there was bravery, but most of all it was about him and me, and our little secret from the world' (p 149). As they age, they follow different paths, although Courtney remains at the hub of their triangle, and they maintain a tortured kinship, often characterised by a violence fuelled by testosterone, alcohol and drugs. Neil's drugged antics at uni culminate in a fight (pp 124-5) after which Gordon takes the sword he gave him as a going away present, and leaves. Stuart, in a depressed state exacerbated by his drug intake, commits suicide one night after phoning Neil. Later, after the play, Neil again argues with Gordon, about Stuart's death, both of them worse for wear: 'I thought of following him but he had told me not to, to forget any type of following or remembering, any type of hanging or yearning.' (p 216) The final devastating news which Neil gives Gordon on the night of his wedding, that Courtney lost her virginity to Stuart not Gordon, is perhaps the nail in the coffin of their friendship.

For some men life gets too hard, and the ultimate expression of teenage angst and alienation is suicide which is often said to be triggered by, or attributed to a disastrous romance or to pressure in finishing school. Tommy was everyone's golden haired boy - scholastically, socially and athletically - until he met Bianca, who caused his grades and prowess to plummet, and when she dumped him, he killed himself. But things are never as simple as that. Michael Shoe's brother Daniel walked into the sea the day he got done for DUI. And Stuart was everyone's pal until he shot himself only a few years after finishing school. Neil wonders 'It was all I wanted to know in this fucking world: where did the beautiful boys go? Where did the beautiful boys go? Where the hell did they go?...' (p 254) Stuart remains a character in this narrative well after his death, for he visits Neil and offers him advice and counsel, playing the part of a sort of Shakespearean ghost figure: 'Just dreaming,' I would say. 'Is this correct?' 'You are dreaming,' he would reply, condescending. 'When will you start living?' 'Why did *you* stop living?' I asked. 'I told you, bro: here for a good time not a long time.' (p 266) More ominously he suggests: 'Kill yourself, Nelly, you'll never feel so alive.' (p 269)

Acting and performing a role is integral to Neil's interactions, for he's always been an actor, and imagines his real life in scenes: 'This kind of real-life performance was something I really enjoyed. I was good at it ... But this was not drama class, and this was not an exercise, this was a house with spikes in it.' (p 14) When he and Swanna get pregnant he sees it in terms of a performance. 'I loved Swanna so much in the revelation, and the thought of making a person together made so much sense to me. It was the only thing we had not yet made together, and I knew, like all the other pieces of art and love we had made, this would be the most magic, the most life-changing, and the most true. This was to be our greatest show ever, and it was all for us.' (p 236) In observing Gordon's devotion to Courtney he thinks: '... this was not acting, this was it. All my life I had thought about what on earth 'it' was, and how to get it, and here it was in front of me, the big and beautiful 'it', and I knew right then that it was all there is.' (p 260) Authenticity in life is thus often gauged in theatrical terms. When he becomes an addict and accepts an invitation to Gordon's house he thinks: '... here I was at the family pool party in a suit feeling like something out of the Dada movement: a figure in an incorrect landscape.' (p 308)

Finding one's place in the world is also about realising that 'home' is always with us, wherever we travel. So this work is a tribute to Cronulla the 'daggy' beachside suburb where Neil grew up and which he thought he needed to escape. Like Johnno in David Malouf's classic, it's only by going away that Neil sees what Cronulla represents to him. Even his friends encourage him to escape: eg 'Go fly, mate. You're the special one. Seriously, just go fly. Fuck Cronulla, it's a fucking hole, mate.' (p 83) Neil's artistic aspirations convince him that Cronulla is holding him back. 'No one here had anything to do but harm what they didn't understand.' (p 91) He mortally wounds Gordon (p 95) by telling him he needs to escape their smallness of mind. 'In order to grow, we have to unchain

ourselves from the past...I just need to go and find myself, and I can't do that with the people from my past judging me as I go.' (p 101) Arriving late for Gordon's 21<sup>st</sup> he discovers that he is living with Courtney, and thinks with an inner sneer: 'Found was the forlorn garb of conservatism. Just as Gordon would like her ... The 'yes, it's okay' look of the Southern Districts.' (p137). His ultimate moment of self-deception is when he emails Courtney her dead brother's advice: 'there was 'a big world out there ... and these duties and burdens such as mum and your marriage will keep you from it girl.' (p 278) Neil has to discover the truth expressed by Courtney: 'back here in this sad little corner of the world that you despise so much, we have been involved in what is commonly known as *real life*, life with *real* things in it, like pain and love and -' (p 159). Years later he writes in penitence: 'And I am not proud of certain things. Tell me a man who is proud of all his movements and I will eat a chair. But what surprised me most, and warmed me deep, was the level of forgiveness and, inevitably, the care that comes with people from the southern suburbs.' (p 225)

His reconciliation with his home though, is not without caveats since there is a dark side even to this beach side paradise, as there is to any place. For this novel obliquely traces the origins of the Cronulla Riots of 2005 to the small mindedness that so offends Neil: 'Because that's what I see when I come home to Cronulla, a bunch of white people who believe what they want to believe and see only what they want to see -' (p 316) The seeds of this unrest were clear to him at school in the mid 90s: 'It worked like chequers in Cronulla. The Bombers would do something one week, like pop one of our footballs with a compass, or call a white chick a slut for wearing a black bra under her sheer white school top, then the white guys would retaliate and the whole thing would build then splinter and fights would break out at train stations and shopping villages all over town.' (p 90) And as an adult, Gordon speaks for a vocal majority when he explains to Neil about: 'the infiltration of the Cronulla community by Lebanese people. It was the curse of being the last train station apparently; they all 'got out and had a look around, and who would have fucken thought, they liked it!' (pp 236-7) Gordon, who is generous 'to a fault', has also made lots of money in this paradise, and he doesn't want 'others' encroaching on his patch. There's a seamy undercurrent to the rosy picture of his financial contentment that perhaps he is riding on the back of other's dreams, and that 'money talks'. When Gordon's dad Peter returns to threaten his mother Carmen, his stepdad and business partner Albert intervenes. 'Before that visit, Albert had made him a proposal: the police had failed to find Peter and enforce the AVO, so Albert thought it was time they took matters into their own hands.' (p 160) Gordon confesses to Neil that the houses he and Albert build and sell at enormous profit are made of shoddy materials; it seems that he is not only 'relaxed and comfortable', but keen to make sure that he stays that way.

'All I had was the fresh knowledge that people were pain, and this excluded nobody.' (p 291) The message throughout the novel is that we generally learn through our love for people (or places), that we must also acknowledge the things we despise about them as well. Neil makes several returns home to seek the comfort of his friends, despite the underlying issues they struggle to resolve. Stuart, even from the grave, tries to tempt Neil to wilful self-destruction; Gordon tries to 'help' Neil by keeping him anchored to home so that he can witness his own contentment and success; Courtney, despite an avowed love for Gordon, has always enjoyed her power over Neil. Such is the nature of close relationships, for when we are honest with one another, maturity lies in recognizing that we each have a dark and a bright side; that everyone has flaws, and that we must learn to love those whom we love the most, for both.

As we grow older and inevitably experience events such as unrequited love, relationship break-ups, the death of loved ones, disillusionment or betrayal by friends or colleagues, we develop a veneer of protection which makes us harder. As Neil suggests: 'I was lurching dangerously towards the conclusion that as we aged, we cared less and less about what might happen, and whom it might happen to. We cared much less than we should, but we went about pretending that we cared the fuck out of each other in some vain attempt to obtain a sense of decency, because decency was purpose and purpose was light and without light the ocean said 'come here tonight'.' (pp 330-1) He tries to drown his grief over several such losses in alcohol and drugs, and he even loses interest in theatre for awhile. 'I was beginning to believe that no one was worth loving in this world, that everyone was evil and self-obsessed in their truest hour, and so I cried in the knowledge

that I would never let a soul in again, I would go cold from now on in and shut the world out, it was the only option. These were my final tears and the rain was joining me.' (pp 289-290) He teeters on the edge of a spiritual malaise which has troubled him all his life: 'There's something so appalling about living, something so greedy and grotesque. The space we take up, all the noise we make, the air we demand; who are we to think we are entitled to it, who are we to think our sound is pleasant., that we are worthy of breath.' (p 372) He thinks that he can build a big brick wall around his heart, can finally let go of everything, but the vision of little Oscar as Neil floats in the sea off Cronulla, reminds him that he has a responsibility to go on for the sake of the lost and beautiful boys both past and present who do not have the power to decide that their lives are truly worth living. He must heed the words of Dylan Thomas:

*Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rage at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

## WRITING STYLE

1. This work is seemingly structured sequentially and chronologically since its three parts [Part 1 (p 1+) Ch 1-11; Part 2 (p 105+) Ch 12-23; Part 3 (p 217+) Ch 24-36] follow the course of Neil's life. However, within these parts the chapters weave together in a non-chronological way, by dipping and weaving between the present and the past months and years leading up to it. This creates a suspense and dynamic tension which keeps the reader guessing. eg Part 3 starts seven years after Neil left university and Bathurst to live and work in London, and begins with him back in Cronulla. However, it flashes back several times to his love-filled years with Swanna in London gradually revealing the traumatic reasons how and why they broke up. Throughout the book, surprises lie in wait as Neil suddenly refers to past events which have not been obvious (eg p 263 at the end of Ch 28) and then flashes back to describe them. This is a very effective technique in driving the reading of this narrative. Discuss.

2. This book falls into the semi-autobiographical fictional genre inhabited by Australian novels such as *Praise* by Andrew McGahan, *After January* by Nick Earls, *Monkey Grip* by Helen Garner, and *Johnno* by David Malouf. In such fictions authors locate their narratives within a particular era when they themselves were in their youths, and create fictional events and characters based on the type of people they spent time with. Brendan Cowell grew up in Cronulla, attended a Bathurst theatre course, and became an actor, writer, and director. But there the similarities end since there are many aspects of the work which are also fictional. Nevertheless, what might the issues be in translating one's experiences in this way?

3. Metaphors, similes and other literary devices in this novel, evince a love of language's capacities to have visceral and dramatic impact. Neil often describes key events in a metaphorical way eg 'Marriage,' he said, 'is like screwing a lid to a jar; it fits two things together and makes them one.' The metaphor, like the day, scared her.' (p 220) or 'Two refugee ships desperate to find a common sandbank - something.' (p 134) Simile is also inventively used: 'the woman was as frail as quail bones' (p 15) or 'We fished quietly as the moon made its first offering to the night, appearing as a sort of fucked-up white banana that a mouse had chewed a hole in, but on its travels managed to insert a row of forty-watt bulbs inside.' (p 363) Discuss any passage which was particularly resonant for you?

4. Humour undercuts the serious moments in the novel. He describes Nina Gonzales' obsessiveness after her son Tommy's suicide: 'hell hath no fury like a woman blending.' (p 11) When feeling desperate, he writes: 'That winter I did think about killing myself, but to tell the truth I couldn't choose a way... I also found the whole suicide thing so unoriginal; it seemed everyone in Cronulla was doing it. So I plodded along in my ennui, declaring to myself that to continue on was braver than to feebly give in to the gloom and fuck up those who loved you.' (p 29) Dismayed by Gordon's Bucks Party, he says: 'I would be no use in a war, the only thing I could do was protect the art and, you know, linger around sipping tea and wiping down the maps and navigation instruments. (p 249) Of weddings he says: 'Being at a wedding is like being inside a pinball machine; one bounces from trivial conversation to polite conversation to incomprehensible conversation to utterly awkward conversation, ending up somewhere near the corner of the room with a chubby auntie angling for more drinks and a melba toast with smoked salmon and a bit of green something leaf popped on the thing - then WHACK away again.' (p 326) Discuss humour in this novel.

5. Characters in the novel are described in some very insightful ways. Choose a description and discuss what it reveals about the person. Which character did you find most intriguing and why?



## THE AUTHOR

Brendan Cowell is an Australian actor, writer and director. He was born in Cronulla, New South Wales, and completed a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre/Media at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst. Brendan's plays have been produced by prominent theatre companies in Australia and internationally, and he has received the Patrick White Playwrights' Award, the Griffin Award and the Philip Parsons Young Playwright's Award. Brendan played the popular character Tom in *Love My Way* and wrote many episodes of the critically acclaimed television drama series which won the AFI Award for Best Television Drama Series for each of its three seasons (2005-2007). He has played the lead role in feature films, including the 2007 crime drama *Noise*, for which he was awarded a Film Critics Circle Award and nominated for an AFI Award, World War I drama *Beneath Hill 60* and rom-com *I Love You Too*. Brendan played *Hamlet* in a 2009 Bell Shakespeare production. Brendan lives in Newtown, Sydney, and is a committed supporter of the Cronulla Sharks rugby league team.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the quote (by Patrick White) at the beginning of the memoir in relation to the text.
2. Men's difficulty in expressing themselves sometimes has fatal effects. Neil realises that Courtney fears bringing a boy into the world: 'her fear of 'the kid' becoming like the rest of us failed fellows who were brought up on manicured lawns by idyllic beaches ... beneath the orb which draped us in golden sunlight - the blessed fellows who chose their own exit before it came to them, the lemming boys who wandered up the cliff and dropped away without a change of expression, blindly fading out in perfect unison, un-keen on what might come to bear on this land, in the mall, in the marriage, in the marketplace.' (pp 350-1) Why do so many boys suffer a lack of self-confidence and hope?
3. 'The entire school surrounded us, everyone screaming 'Fight! Fight! Fight!' I wondered whether they would all be cheering 'Dance! Dance! Dance!' if David and I had been dancing together.' (p 28) Neil finds that the culture of masculinity makes it difficult for an artist to make male friends in schools. Discuss.
4. Male culture is also raised in describing the Bathurst 500: 'There was so much violence and so much rape, the police simply raised their hands and bid you good luck. It was quite a time on that hill.' (p 123) How true is this of such sporting events and of male culture in general? Similarly, there's a culture of the 'Buck's Party': '... men, we had to go to war with paint, we had to rape each other in the dirt before we joined our better half in holy matrimony. Somebody make sense of this for me, please! I'm dying out here. Take me back to the tea garden!' (p 251) Why do men play such games, and even have sex (as Gordon and Neil do with two hookers) prior to a wedding?
5. Courtney's family are gridlocked since Tommy's suicide. 'Death crippled the big old house, and it felt real. I liked it.' (p 6) Discuss the issue of teenage suicide and its effect on families.
6. Many students find the process of studying for tertiary entrance scores very traumatic: 'The HSC is a ridiculous construct, the whole thing should be wiped out and re-imagined, gearing itself towards the realities of the workplace, not some meaningless political quiz for private school kids - alienating the weak!' (p 25) Discuss.
7. 'These were the chats of the new generation, and me and my hot girlfriend were at the fucking helm: we would take our brilliant love all the way to university and never ever apologise again!' (p 25) Contemporary teenagers' images of university life have been ironically coloured by perceptions of rebellion invented by Baby Boomer parents which are so clichéd that their children make fun of them as Neil and Courtney do (p 23). Gen Y and X also think they know more about being better parents: 'I definitely think we'll be different though, as parents. We'll be much more in touch and aware.' 'Yeah.' (p 24) Is this generation 'way too' cynical?
8. Neil writes of Stuart and Courtney: 'But as their eyes met for that millisecond, there was the strongest, most foreign, yet palpable attraction ever written in Cronulla history. I read every word of it, and, really, I should have known then.' (p 62) This is a clue which is explained later in the novel. How many such oblique references did you find in this work?
9. The abundant and varied food at Gordon's barbecue suggests both that our affluent society has become too lavishly provisioned (p 312) and is also perhaps a wry commentary on how self-conscious (pretentious) we've become about serving food 'as it's done' on lifestyle and cooking shows. Discuss.
10. Neil commends his mother's eccentricity for having kept him from becoming just like the rest of the boys in Cronulla. He also credits Nina with influencing all their lives: 'Nina ... was the reason Courtney had stayed in Cronulla - she was, in my opinion, the reason we were all here tonight, inadvertently, for if she hadn't laid on the Catholic guilt after Tommy's death and Eric's disappearance, and rolled around the house all depressed making fruit whips like a psycho fruitwhip machine, then Courtney could have fl own away freely,

to find herself, find her place, and possibly find me in this process)' (p 325) Are parents so responsible for their children's decisions in life?

11. Neil offers a self-deprecating satirical description of his theatre work in London (p 313) which is very funny. What does this novel say about the theatre world in general?

12. Neil reflects on Gordon and Courtney's love: 'these unspectacular deposits of love he had made and they were the currency, earning enough to have her see that he was nothing but the right one.' (p 263) Is Neil correct about them; are they likely to be happy together?

13. In the last pages of the book, Neil experiences a revelation that to Gordon, Courtney was a trophy; something he needed both to prove his superiority to Neil, and to prove his worth as a man. Is Gordon as simple and honest a character as Neil wants him to be?

14. 'Without work the tyres blew and there was nothing between us to travel on.' (p 271) Swanna and Neil deal with their grief in different ways and drift apart, which is typical of the strains placed on couples by the loss of a child. Discuss.

15. Neil's dream in which Stuart asks him: 'Why do you lie?' (p 241) is a seminal moment in the novel. What has Neil been lying about, and for how long? Is this question just about his relationships with Swanna or Courtney, or about other events in his life?

16. Neil and Courtney connect again by email. Their honesty there is typical of email interactions. Is there a dangerous tendency to say too much on the net because of its immediacy?

17. Although Neil is an engagingly tortured hero, it's hard to understand his lack of empathy for his sister Agatha. How has she survived this family? The only references to her are as either someone with no friends (p 20), or someone whose occupation is unknown to Neil (p 314). Does familial dysfunction make us oblivious to our siblings' needs?

18. Australians have often been criticised for their inability to engage in meaningful conversation: 'This was what I'd loved about Germany: those people in Berlin had no interest in small talk. If I commented on the weather or their hair they looked at me like I was a gay octopus, but if I asked them about their fathers, or the configuration of stars, or the importance of Heiner Müller towards a new German theatre, their eyes would light up and a truly satisfying conversation would inevitably unfold. Perhaps this was what a fraught history did; it slaughtered the trivial. But then these people around me, well they were also stricken with tragedy and pain. The small talk seemed to act as a helmet against the constant knock of it, a way of disregarding all the bleeding elephants in the room with talk of waves and halfbacks and house prices and 'yeah, no, sounds good'.' (p 329) Discuss.

19. What do you think 'Part 4' of Neil's life might consist of? Has he discovered anything new at the end of the novel?

20. 'What magic scale childhood does make of raw adult reality.' (p 243) How much is this novel about the disappointments of adulthood and the need to accept them with grace and stoicism?

## HOW IT FEELS

Brendan Cowell

Picador Australia

Trade paperback - ISBN: 9781405039291

These Notes may be printed or viewed for your own private, non-commercial use.

This material is copyright and may not be repackaged, resold or posted electronically on networks without prior written permission from Pan Macmillan Australia.

Pan Macmillan Australia  
Level 25, 1 Market Street,  
Sydney NSW 2000

[www.panmacmillan.com.au](http://www.panmacmillan.com.au)

©2011 Pan Macmillan Australia