



Rhys Wakefield Gemma Ward Luke Ford Erik Thomson and Toni Collette

# THE BLACK BALLOON

From the producer of 'STRICTLY BALLROOM'

FILM FINANCE CORPORATION AUSTRALIA and MEDIA ENTERTAINMENT INTERNATIONAL and BLACK BALLOON PRODUCTIONS PRESENT IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE NEW SOUTH WALES FILM AND TELEVISION OFFICE and in association with ANITA AND LUCA BELCHIORNO METTIS 'RHYS WAKEFIELD GEMMA WARD LUKE FORD ERIK THOMSON and TONI COLLETTE  
'THE BLACK BALLOON' CASTING NIKKI BARRETT SOUND DESIGNER PAUL PROCKA COSTUME DESIGNER CLAUDE EDWARDSVILLE MUSIC BY MICHAEL VEZERSKI EDITOR VERONICA JONES ACE PRODUCTION DESIGNER NICHOLAS MACALLUM DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY DENSON BAKER ACE LINE PRODUCER SALLY ANNE SMITH EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS ANITA BELCHIORNO METTIS SALLY CHESTER  
TONI COLLETTE MARK GOODER WRITTEN BY ELISSA OTTAVI JIMMY THE EMPLOYEE PRODUCED BY TRISTRAN MALL DIRECTED BY ELISSA OTTAVI  
AURORA

## A STUDY GUIDE BY MARGUERITE O'HARA

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## Introduction

*The Black Balloon* (Elissa Down, 2007) is an Australian film about a family dealing with the day-to-day challenges of living with an autistic son. Charlie is seventeen and presents all kinds of embarrassing situations for Thomas, his 15 (going on 16)-year-old brother. The film deals with a number of issues about family life and the difficulties, challenges and rewards faced by families in which one of the members has a disability.

The warmth, humour, love and generosity of the Mollison family makes for a very engaging film that is neither sentimental nor grim in its depiction of growing up with a family member with autism. It is an inspiring story about the power of love, family and friendship.

## Synopsis

It's not easy being Thomas. He's turning sixteen and moving into a new house – and school. His older brother Charlie announces their arrival to the neighbours by banging a

wooden spoon and wailing on the front lawn. Charlie doesn't speak. He's autistic and has ADD. He's also unpredictable, sometimes unmanageable, and often disgusting. Thomas hates his brother but wishes he didn't.

The Mollisons are an army family; but it's not what you'd call a regimented life, or even a regular household. Thomas's cricket-obsessed father, Simon, talks to his teddy. Simon and Maggie are openly intimate, and now Maggie is going to have another baby.

One morning, the semi-naked Charlie escapes the house and leads Thomas on a chase across the neighbourhood. Charlie bursts into a stranger's house to use the toilet; and Thomas finds himself face to face with Jackie Masters, his gawky but fascinating new classmate. The trouble is she's in the shower.

Maggie has complications with her pregnancy and becomes bedridden. Thomas and Simon between them take on Charlie's daily routine and Thomas

*It's hard to  
fit in, when  
you're the  
odd one out.*



experiences the less savoury aspects of coping with his brother. What he didn't bargain for was the shit-smearing, shopping centre tantrums, and riding in the Autistic School bus. It's sink or swim, and Thomas is drowning.

The truth is he is – literally. The school swimming lessons are a nightmare, because Thomas has never got beyond doggie paddle. Then Thomas is partnered with Jackie for basic life-saving; and Jackie swims like a fish. It's only when they get to mouth-to-mouth resuscitation that things pick up and young love blossoms between the two – well, three, because Charlie is also entranced by the pretty girl.

Thomas's sixteenth birthday dinner turns into a nightmare. Pent-up frustrations about his brother pour out that are both confronting and ultimately heart-warming.

## Curriculum Relevance

*The Black Balloon* would be an excellent classroom resource for middle and senior secondary students of:

- English
- Society and Environment (SOSE/HSIE)
- Values Education
- Religion and Society
- Personal Development
- Media and Film Studies

It represents issues about growing up, dealing with disappointments and becoming resilient, in a unique and engaging way. Students should find it truthful and inspiring, but

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above all enjoyable.

Students may recognize several of the actors in the film who include Rhys Wakefield (Thomas), who plays Lucas in *Home and Away*; Gemma Ward (Jackie), a successful young Australian model with an international career; Toni Collette (Maggie), from *Muriel's Wedding* (P.J. Hogan, 1994), *Japanese Story* (Sue Brooks, 2003), *Little Miss Sunshine* (Jonathan Dayton & Valerie Faris, 2006) and many other feature films; Erik Thomson (Simon), from *All Saints*, *Wildside*, *MDA*, and *Somersault* (Cate Shortland, 2004) and Luke Ford (Charlie) from *Kokoda* (Alister Grierson, 2006), *All Saints* and *McLeod's Daughters*.

The soundtrack incorporates a number of popular songs, including The Screaming Jets' 'Better' and Neil Finn's classic, 'Fall at your Feet'.

## Using *The Black Balloon* in the classroom

### Before watching the film

- What do you know about Autism spectrum disorders? Brainstorm ideas and share them with your class.
- Have you watched any films or documentaries, or read any books, where there is a character with some form of autism?



- What are some of the stereotypical attitudes people have towards those with some form of disability?
- Describe some of the day-to-day demands on families providing care for a disabled family member.
- What kind of respite or break from 24-hour caring is available for people in these situations?
- How do you think living with a disabled brother or sister can enrich peoples' lives?
- In what ways might everyone's social and work activities be limited through their responsibilities of caring for a dependent family member?
- Describe a time when your parents' behaviour embarrassed you in front of

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your friends.

- What are some of the most difficult aspects of moving house and changing schools?

## Cast and Crew

### Main characters

Rhys Wakefield – Thomas Mollison, 15-year-old son of Maggie and Simon, younger brother of Charlie.

Luke Ford – Charlie Mollison, 17-year-old son of Maggie and Simon, older brother of Thomas.

Erik Thomson – Simon Mollison, father.

Toni Collette – Maggie Mollison, mother.

Gemma Ward – Jackie Masters, Thomas' girlfriend.

## Filmmakers

Elissa Down co-wrote and directed *The Black Balloon*. Here is an excerpt from her director's statement where she talks about the inspiration for the film:

*The Black Balloon is a 'dramedy' inspired by my own family – growing up within its warm and wacky walls. I have two brothers with autism. My father was in the army so we had to move across the country and fit into new neighbourhoods, new schools*



and new groups of friends.

The character of Charlie is based on my youngest brother Sean who has autism, ADHD, and is an elective mute. As in the film, he did run into other people's houses and use the toilet; he threw public tantrums and liked playing with his own pool! The main heart of the film is to reflect my experience growing up. What it is like to be a sibling: frustrating, upsetting and embarrassing but also funny, uplifting and joyful.

Down has made a number of films, including: *Ladybirds* (2005), *Summer Angst* (2004), *The Cherry Orchard* (2003), *Her Outback* (2002), *The Bathers* (2003), *HMAS Unicorn* (2001), *Samantha Stewart, Aged 14* (2000) and *Pink Pyjamas* (2001).

Jimmy Jack (a.k.a. Jimmy the Exploder) – co-writer and co-producer of the film.

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Tristram Miall – producer. Tristram has produced many documentaries and feature films, including *Strictly Ballroom* (Baz Luhrmann, 1992), *Looking for Alibrandi* (Kate Woods, 2000) and *Children of the Revolution* (Peter Duncan, 1996). Documentaries include *Cane Toads* (Mark Lewis, 1988), *Bingo, Bridesmaids and Braces* (Gillian Armstrong, 1988) and *Gumshoe* (Malcolm McDonald, 1992).

Denson Baker ACS – cinematographer. Apart from his work on a number of music videos and commercials, Denson has shot *Deck Dogz* (Steve Pasvolsky, 2005), *The Life and Times of Michael*

*Hutchence* (2005), *Kanyini* (Melanie Hogan, 2006) and *Naked on the Inside* (Kim Farrant, 2006).

Nicholas McCallum – production designer. Credits include *Kokoda, Gettin' Square* (Jonathan Teplitzky, 2003), *Travelling North* (Carl Schultz, 1987), *Bodyline* and *Razorback* (Russell Mulcahy, 1984).

Veronica Jenet ASE – editor. Nominated for an Academy Award, Veronica's credits include *Bastard Boys, Love's Brother* (Jan Sardi, 2004), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002), *Holy Smoke* (Jane Campion, 1999), *The Portrait of a Lady* (Jane



Campion, 1996), *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993) and *Sweetie* (Jane Campion, 1989).

Michael Yezerski – composer. Apart from composing the score for this film, he provided additional music for *Kenny* (Clayton Jacobson, 2006) and *Suburban Mayhem* (Paul Goldman, 2006).

### About Autism

Autism is a disorder characterized by developmental delay. It is generally described as a 'spectrum'. This term means that there are different kinds of autism and not one single set of behaviours amongst people diagnosed with autism. It generally includes some of the following characteristics:

- extreme discomfort with the unfamiliar
- monotone or echolalic (repeating words spoken by others as in echoing) speech patterns, or sometimes incoherent speech or remaining mostly mute.
- difficulty understanding social cues
- unusual preoccupations
- obsessive compulsive repetitive behaviours
- hypersensitivity to sounds
- lack of empathy and difficulty responding to affection and touching
- unwillingness to make eye contact with others

Autism does not mean shyness, social awkwardness or eccentricity. People diagnosed with autism rarely exhibit all of

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the above characteristics and behaviours. Approximately 1 in 400 children are diagnosed with this disorder, generally before the age of three, and three out of four of those diagnosed are males. The reasons for this are unclear. Treatments are evolving and generally involve specialized early intervention and management.

Some autistic people are endowed with exceptional skills in particular areas such as manipulating numbers and

mathematics or have artistic abilities or special gifts in particular areas such as working with animals. Asperger's syndrome (AS) is the term often used to characterize high-functioning autistic people. The sites listed here provide information about autism and are clearly indexed with many useful links:

<<http://www.autismvictoria.org.au>>

<<http://www.autismhelp.info/>>



[htm/spectrum/faq.htm](http://htm/spectrum/faq.htm)>

In addition, the second listed website provides a number of answers to Frequently Asked Questions about autism.

### Representations of autism in film and literature

Writers and filmmakers have represented autism through a range of characters in films and books. Such popular portrayals both inform and define public views about disabilities like autism, but how far do they really represent the complex realities of living with autism for families and individuals?

Some students may be familiar with Mark Haddon's novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, set for study on many English courses, or perhaps have seen *Rain Man* (Barry Levinson, 1988), a film starring Dustin Hoffman and

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Tom Cruise as brothers. Each is a story about an individual with Asperger's syndrome, a type of autism, represented in a way that makes the central character a kind of heroic eccentric. The autistic character is shown as 'otherworldly', living in his own private and unknowable world. Other films dealing with autism include *Mercury Rising* (Harold Becker, 1998), *Mask* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1985) and *Molly* (John Duigan, 1998).

*The Black Balloon* is different as it looks steadily at a family living each day with an autistic teenager. Charlie is neither a high-functioning Asperger's sufferer who initiates his own

activities and challenges like Christopher Boone in Haddon's novel, nor a 'savant' like Raymond Babbit in *Rain Man*, with a phenomenal memory for counting cards. *The Black Balloon* is not so much a 'warts and all' story as a 'warts, tears and smiles' film that deals compassionately with how a family lives with the challenges of bringing up two sons, one of whom has a disability.

### Student Activity – close viewing

Before you watch *The Black Balloon*, divide your class into five groups. Each group could focus their attention on one



of the five main characters: Thomas, Charlie, Maggie, Simon and Jackie. Your task is to put yourself in their shoes, as far as this is possible. This will make it easier to talk and write about the film after you have watched it. Read through the questions below (2. The Family Dynamic) relating to your chosen character before watching the film.

### After watching the film

There is a lot going on in this film so it might be easiest to look at the story under several headings as a way of organizing your responses.

#### 1. Representing the family and their world diagrammatically.

Before looking more closely at the characters, construct a Venn diagram, using appropriate software, to represent how different members of the Mollison family are both connected and disconnected from their local community. Start with a circle with Maggie, Simon, Charlie and Thomas inside it and show how other groups and individuals overlap with their lives. You might like to choose colours to show both negative and positive interactions.

#### 2. The family dynamic

Simon, Maggie, Charlie and Thomas are a close-knit family unit, soon to be added to by the child Maggie is carrying. However, as in all families, there are tensions, some of them a result of Thomas's conflicted feelings about living with Charlie and the difficulties this creates.

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#### a. Being Thomas

Put yourself in Thomas' position and describe some of the incidents shown in the film that he finds particularly difficult. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- How are the difficulties about moving to a new neighbourhood and a new school shown?
- Explain how some of the really gross things Charlie does affect Thomas, e.g. running into Jackie's house, poo smearing, supermarket tantrum, masturbating in front of Jackie at the birthday tea, trying to eat Jackie's tampon, spitting at people.
- Who are the people who help Thomas to understand that

Charlie is always going to behave in ways that are not regarded as 'normal' because of his disability?

- Everyone's family can be embarrassing sometimes. What do Thomas' parents do and say that he finds embarrassing?
- Describe three scenes in the film that show Thomas sharing his life with Charlie.

#### b. Being Charlie

It is difficult for anyone to know what it is like being disabled when they're not, but it's important to at least try to develop an empathetic understanding of how life is for Charlie.

- Explain when Charlie seems

to be calm and happy, part of both his own and his family's world.

- What activities give him pleasure and a sense of achievement?
- What situations does Charlie find especially difficult to respond to without becoming distressed?
- How do we know how Charlie is feeling?
- Given Charlie's limited capacity to communicate through speech, what are his main ways of communicating his feelings?
- What are some of Charlie's achievements in the film?
- How is he shown to have feelings of sorrow and affection for his family?
- After the poo incident, Maggie says to Thomas, 'Your brother will never be able to do the things you can do. He'll never have a job or a family; he'll

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live with us for the rest of his life'. What does this tell us and Thomas about the reality of being Charlie?

## c. Being Maggie

Maggie is in the final stages of pregnancy and has developed *pre-eclampsia*, a condition that can develop in late pregnancy, characterized by high blood pressure and other symptoms. It can put both the safety of the mother and baby at risk and requires rest and care.

- How would you describe Maggie's personality?
- How is her love for her sons expressed in the film?
- How would you describe her marriage to Simon?
- What particular demands might caring for an 18-year-

old disabled son place on her time and energy?

- Is she able to successfully juggle the demands of her family with her own needs for time and rest?
- What slightly unusual significance does 'bathtime' have in this family?

## d. Being Simon

- What qualities in Simon might be seen as a bit eccentric but also quite endearing?
- What skills does he demonstrate as a father and minder when Maggie is hospitalized?
- Do you think he places too much responsibility and expectations on Thomas in caring for Charlie?



- In what ways does Simon embarrass Thomas?
- When Thomas asks his father if he ever wished Charlie was normal, Simon says, 'your mother thinks we got Charlie because we're capable ... strong enough to deal with it. All I know is he's my own'. What does this answer tell us about Simon's approach to life?
- How does he react to the Department of Community Services visiting the house?
- What aspects of his personality reflect his army work?

#### e. Being Jackie

While many students would no doubt like to have Gemma Ward, the beautiful girl who plays Jackie in the film, as a girlfriend living round the corner and teaching them to swim, she

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is first of all a friend to Thomas and Charlie Mollison.

- What is it in Jackie's friendship with Thomas that helps him to accept his brother?
- How does she encourage Thomas to include Charlie in their life and daily activities?
- In what ways does her attraction to Thomas make his life at school less difficult, particularly in relation to the other students?
- 'Easy for you to say, he's not your brother', says Thomas to Jackie. How does she respond?
- What does she like about the

Mollison family?

- What does her birthday present to Thomas show us about her feelings for him?
- How does the scene where the three of them are in army bushland during the storm both advance the romance and intensify the friendship between the three main characters?
- What does her response to the *Afloat* concert show us about her increasing closeness with the Mollisons?

### 3. Outsiders – peer pressures, neighbours

There are a number of other people in this film, some of whom spy, jeer, stare, are annoyed by, and sometimes interact with, Charlie and his family.

- Which of the non-family members in the film demonstrate decent concern and care for Charlie and Thomas?
- Describe some of the ignorant teasing, mimicking and jeering of Charlie and his schoolmates that we see in the film? What does this suggest about peer pressure?
- How do the Mollisons' neighbours react to them, and particularly to Charlie and his unusual behaviour? Put yourself in the position of the next door neighbour,



who contacts community services, and try and understand what it is like for her to live with the banging and shouting coming from the Mollison house. You may have experienced noisy neighbours yourself and know how annoying they can be!

- d. How do people outside the immediate family help in his care?
- e. Did you find the behaviour displayed by Thomas' classmates to be an accurate reflection of how disability and difference is treated?
- f. How can people become better educated about responding to and accepting the often unpredictable behaviour of autistic people and those with other forms of intellectual disability?
- g. Why do you think many families are reluctant to place their disabled children in the care of others, even for short periods of time?
- h. Many disabled students now attend mainstream schools. Should (and could) students with special needs like Charlie be integrated into schools?

#### 4. Time, place and title

While *The Black Balloon* is a film about a timeless and universal subject, when and where is it set?

- What clues are there in the film that might indicate the time and place when the story takes place? Make a list of

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some of the things in the film that might identify whether it is set in the 1980s, 1990s or 2000s. (Don't assume people don't still drive 1969 Valiant cars.) Consider the music, the television, Nintendo® Games, bikes and how people dress, as well as the social attitudes shown in the film.

- Discuss what you think the title of the film might refer to. A black balloon does appear when the film titles are on screen early in the film. What does a black balloon suggest to you?

## Student Activity – Key Scenes and quotes

- Identify at least three scenes you think are particularly important in the film, e.g. the final scene with Charlie and Thomas together in the bath.
- Explain to members of your class, or in small groups, why you think one of these scenes works well, and why it is central to the development of the story. Explain how it illustrates the central issue and advances the story.

### Quotes

Who says the following and in what context. What does each one reveal about the speaker?

- *He's not my responsibility ... he's a freak ... I don't want anything to do with him.*

- *Your mother thinks we got Charlie because we're capable ... strong enough to deal with it.*
- *All I know is he's my own.*
- *We've received complaints about one of your children ... persistent fighting.*
- *That's what it's like for my brother. Not just what he can see. It's what he hears. What he thinks. Everything. I think it's all fuzzy.*
- *You have to stop wishing Charlie was normal. He's never going to change.*
- *It's not fair, is it mate.*
- *You scared the shit out of me ... I fucked up.*
- *You just pissed on my leg.*

### Director's Statement.

Elissa Down talks about casting and preparing for the film shoot:

*Because of the character nature of the script, casting was paramount. Toni Collette was the first choice for the role of Maggie. She has a warmth, humour and strength, all essential to capture the qualities of the Mollison matriarch.*

*I previously worked with Gemma Ward on one of my shorts, Pink Pyjamas. When writing the film, Gemma was in our minds for the character of Jackie. Despite her high status in the fashion world, Gemma is a bit of a clown and a tomboy, and was very enthusiastic about*

the script and came attached to the project, following a successful screen test whilst we were still in development.

For the roles of the two brothers, casting director, Nikki Barrett started our search. Luke Ford was the second actor who auditioned for the role of Charlie. In the first five seconds of seeing him, we knew we had found him. Luke did a phenomenal amount of research for this role. He would strap his knees and arms to achieve the level of stiffness in his movements. He spent days hanging out with my brother and spent hours upon hours taping himself doing basic things in character like watching television and eating.

Rhys Wakefield almost fell into the role of Thomas. He rushed in on his day off from Home and Away and thought he had little chance. We were struck by his boyishness, sensitivity and quiet dignity. Luke and Rhys had an instant connection as brothers. And I knew he had the spunk to pair up well with Gemma. We were so lucky because within a few weeks we had four of our mains finalized.

The casting of Simon took longer than expected. Erik Thomson impressed us with his ability to physicalise the character and balance Simon's playful side with his occupation as a soldier.

Being such a performance orientated film, having four weeks rehearsals with as much as possible on location, was so important. One of the rehearsal exercises for Rhys

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*'You have to stop wishing Charlie was normal. He's never going to change.'*



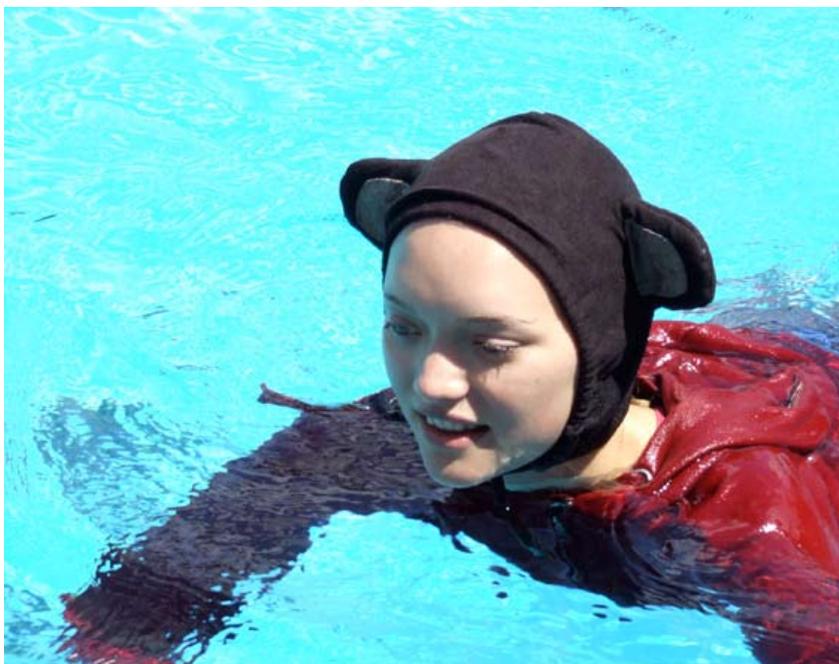
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*and Luke was to go out in public as Thomas and Charlie to feel first hand what it is like to have autism and be a sibling of someone with special needs. They experienced the stares, the remarks, the ignorance or the looks of sympathy from people from all walks of life. Toni learned Makaton signing, Erik did combat style training and Gemma perfected swimming tricks and embraced singing badly!*

*The Black Balloon was a location-based film and on our first location scout we found the perfect house. As fate would have it, it was on the street I first lived on as a child.*

*We originally wanted 'Mungojerrie and Rumpleteaser' from Cats for the musical number to end the film but that was too costly. We came up with the concept inspired [by] Noah's Ark, Afloat!, which allowed us to keep the idea of a pair of animals on stage. Enter composer Michael Yezerski who went away and wrote 'The Greatest!' our Broadway-inspired closing song. In Afloat!, both actors and children and teenagers with autism performed. We used many of the siblings of the performers with autism to support and share the experience of being in a film together.*

*The ethos behind the musical backdrop of the film was to be a combination of score, music from the nineties and original music. All the music that the characters in the film hear are from the era and are songs I knew and loved like Ratcat's 'Don't go now', Jimmy Barnes'*



*'Driving Wheels' and The Screaming Jets' 'Better'. The songs that the 'audience hear' are new material like 'Beautiful Days' sung by Josh Pyke, 'Even' sung by Simon Day and a cover of Crowded House's 'Fall at your feet' by Glenn Richards of Augie March fame.*

## Student Activity – looking at how the film is put together

Just as a novel has its own style, using words to develop characters and present a story, so too does a film have its own elements that combine to convey a story in a particular style. How well elements such as script, narrative structure, performances, editing, soundtrack, setting and cinematography (how the story is filmed) come together,

generally determines our response to a film.

- What did you think of the film?
- How well do all the elements come together?
- Who is the person whose job it is to oversee all the elements that make up the film?

**Script:** How important is dialogue and the way people talk in conveying the mood and tone of this film? Do the filmmakers employ other non-verbal ways to convey meaning? Are silences and gestures part of scripting?

**Narrative structure:** From whose perspective is the story told and over what time frame does the story we see take place? Does it move between

different narrative perspectives?

**Performances:** How dependent is a film like this (with a relatively small ensemble cast) on all the actors playing their parts as closely-linked individuals able to demonstrate their own concerns in concert with others? Which part do you think would be most difficult to play convincingly? With which character did you identify most closely?

**Editing:** In what order are scenes and sequences presented and for how long? Are there patterns apparent in the way scenes are sequenced? E.g. are high tension emotional scenes followed by calmer, more reflective moments that serve to dissipate tensions and show different emotions? How does the editing make connections apparent between one scene and the next?

**Soundtrack:** How effective is the placement of popular songs in establishing and reflecting different moods? What part do the repetitive noises made by Charlie (particularly his tapping and vocalizing) play in the film? How are the sounds of suburban family life integrated into the soundtrack?

**Setting:** There are some indicators of the time and place in which the story is set. How important are they to shaping our understanding of this family's life? Is the story shown to be both timeless and universal and is the suburban Australian setting an important aspect in shaping our responses?

**Cinematography:** How is the story filmed? How often are

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extreme close-ups used? Is there any evidence of hand-held camera shots? What is the difference in the interior and exterior shots where the outside world is contrasted with the closeness of family life in the house? Does the weather play any part in heightening emotional responses to situations in some scenes?

## The Awards Ceremony

Imagine *The Black Balloon* has been nominated for a number of awards at an annual film awards ceremony. You can find a list of the cast and crew of the film earlier in this guide.

- Choose the person you think should receive an award in one of the following categories:
    - a. Best actor in a leading role
    - b. Best actress in a leading role
    - c. Best supporting actor
    - d. Best supporting actress
  - Select an appropriate clip from a scene in the film that best demonstrates the strength of the actor or actress' performance.
  - Write a short speech to be given by the awards presenter describing the main strengths of the winning performance.
- Now select from a number of other possible awards for which the film has been nominated. These could be;

**Production Designer** – responsibility for the look and 'feel' of the film. Do the settings, furnishings, clothes and all the other objects and places in the



film feel right? Does the time and place in which it is set look accurate and believable?

**Editor** – the way scenes are sequenced and how the narrative is structured

**Director** – overall conception and management in combining all the elements, such as camerawork, characterization, scripting and style.

Use the same procedure as you did for best performances in choosing a clip and preparing the notes for the awards presenter.

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## Further Activities

Teachers and students could select from the following activities to extend their understanding of *The Black Balloon*.

1. Talking about living with a disabled family member.

Many people's responses to disabled people are the result of ignorance rather than

malice. Fear and aggression are often prompted by a lack of understanding. Imagine that following the incident outside the school where Charlie becomes upset by the shouting of other people, Thomas is asked by the Phys Ed teacher to give a talk to his class about what it is like to be part of Charlie's family.

- Give the talk Thomas prepares, including some background information about autism as well as anecdotal accounts of what it is like being part of Charlie's family. Include all the positive things about being Charlie's brother as well as the really gross bits.

OR

- Give a talk about your own experiences living with a family member with a disability or chronic illness, such as a parent or a sibling. Explain the type of disability or illness and describe the different demands this places on you as a carer.
2. Create a mural or collage of objects, photos and images for Charlie's bedroom that includes some of the things that might interest him e.g. cars, stars and hats, television characters, monkey ears, family photos, friends and pictures of places he is familiar with.



3. Promotion and marketing are crucial to the success of any film. Prepare a short promotional film in a storyboard format for *The Black Balloon*. Select a number of clips and images from the film that give as complete a sense as possible of both the story and how it is told in the film.

OR

Design a billboard style poster with an image and a brief tagline that best promotes the film. Decide where it should appear—newspapers, online, billboards, buses and trams, television, cinemas, magazines etc.

4. *The Black Balloon* is a courageous film about a subject that is sometimes treated far less realistically in some films, where disabled people may be presented as

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*exotic, freakish or pitiable.*

*This film is different as it looks directly at the complexities of family life with humour and compassion and without any sentimentality.*

Discuss this assessment of the film.

5. The language of disability. How we characterize people and introduce them can determine how they are perceived. Everyone is more than their disability or illness, just as everybody has an identity independent of their job or position in a family. The ignorant, inaccurate and hurtful use of the blanket term 'spaz' is used, both in this film and more broadly in society, as a disparaging

shorthand to characterize people whose appearance and behaviour is different to our own.

- a. What are the damaging connotations of such language, both to individuals and those who use it?
- b. How could being able to 'sign', as Jackie learns in the film, be a huge step in listening to and talking with people who cannot communicate easily through speaking?
- c. Research one of the signing languages such as Makaton and learn several of the signs.



6. Discuss how you and your classmates could include students from a local school catering to special needs students on a school excursion or outing such as a barbecue or coastal walk or visit to an aquarium. You would need to do this in consultation with the teachers from the school who will know what sort of activities would be most enjoyable and positive for the students. Write a letter of invitation to the school and the students inviting them to join you.

7. *Spending time with elderly, disabled or other people whose lives are restricted and limited because of their age or disability offers greater rewards for the helpers than it does for the people they spend time with.*

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If this is true, why are so few people prepared to give their time to others who need both company and access to experiences most people take for granted?

8. Research autism on the internet and prepare a report of no more than 500 words outlining what it is, the incidence of sufferers, how it is diagnosed and how current theory believes this condition can be best managed. Present your findings to your class. You could use the web sites listed under the section About Autism earlier in this guide to gather this information.

## References

<http://www.autismvictoria.org.au>

Site offering clear and accurate information about autism spectrum disorder

<http://www.aspect.org.au>

Autism Spectrum Australia (ASPECT)

<http://www.autismhelp.info/html/spectrum/faq.htm>

Web site offering answers to FAQs about autism spectrum disorder

[http://www.case.edu/affil/sce/Texts\\_2005/Autism%20and%20Representation%20Baker.htm](http://www.case.edu/affil/sce/Texts_2005/Autism%20and%20Representation%20Baker.htm)

Paper exploring how autism spectrum disorders have been represented in films, written by a parent of an autistic child.



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(All websites accessed 10 December 2007)

## Other films and books dealing with disability, families and friendship

*My Brother Vinnie* (Steven McGregor, 2006) a 24-minute documentary about actor Aaron Pedersen and his brother Vinnie, who has cerebral palsy and an intellectual disability. (ATOM study guide available)

*Frank and Daz Take on the World* (Judy Rhymer, 2007) a documentary film about friends Frank and Daryl. Daryl has cerebral palsy and enormous determination. He runs in marathons. (ATOM study guide available)

*Rain Man* (Barry Levinson, 1988), a feature film starring Dustin Hoffman as an autistic man with extraordinary abilities and a

phenomenal memory.

Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Fickling Books, 2003.

This is a story about a boy with Asperger's syndrome, written from his perspective on the world.

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