

Dear Miffy

JOURNEY THROUGH DANGER

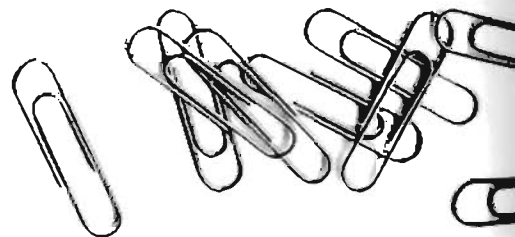
Exploring the Text

Check with your teacher about which questions to try.

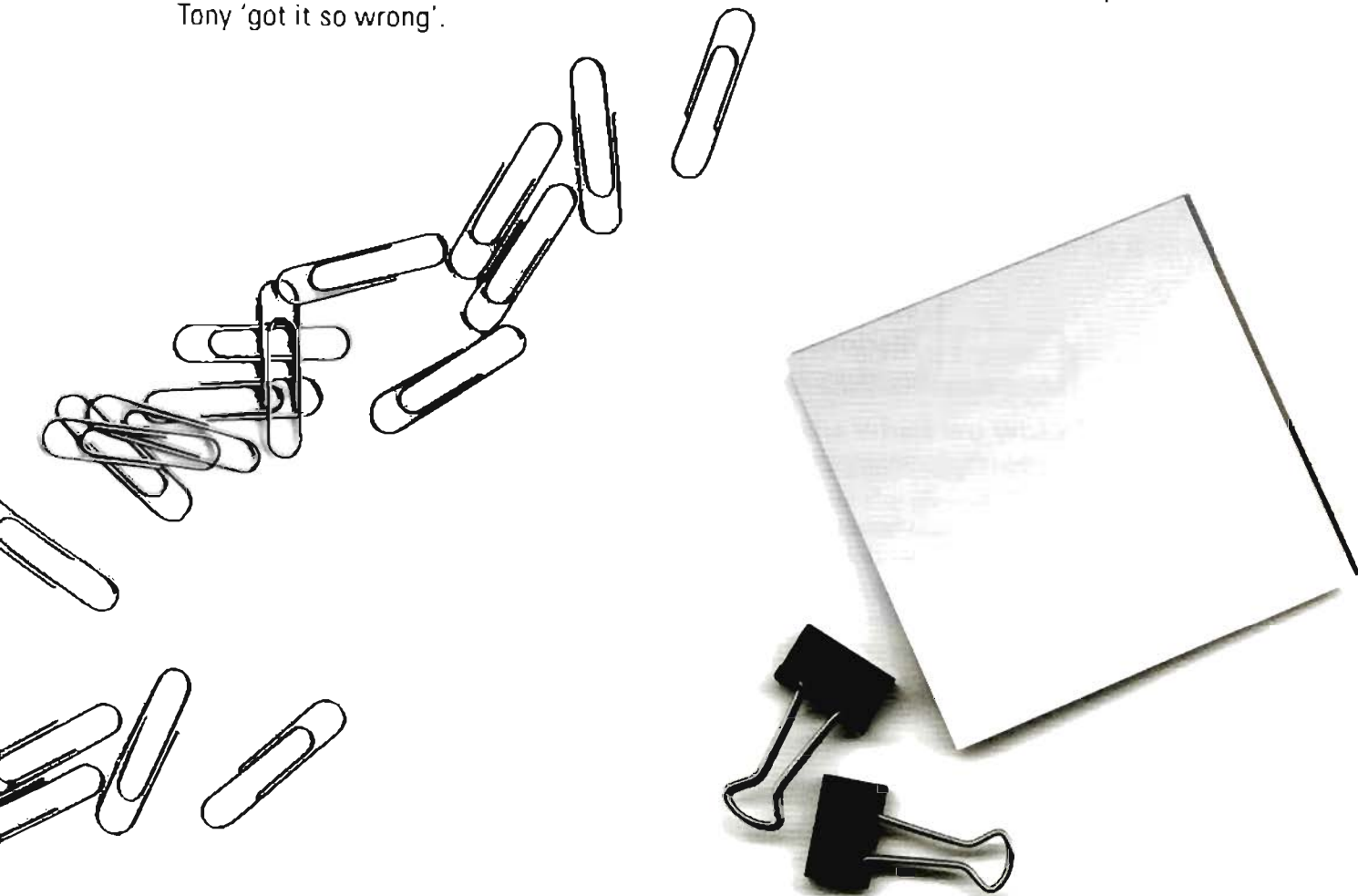
- ① The warning on the back cover of *Dear Miffy* reads: '**Contents may offend some readers**'. What was your immediate reaction to the message? Explain. How did it, if at all, affect your decision to read the novel?
- ② In what way did the language used in the novel highlight aspects of the characters and the story? Do you think John Marsden was justified in his choice of language?
- ③ '**Things change though, don't they Miff? We both know that**' (p. 1). How important is change to you in your life? Consider excitement, disturbance, fear and challenge before you answer.
- ④ '**... then you picked up the Rock Eisteddfod trophy and hit me across the head with it, as hard as you could**' (p. 3).
 - (a) Do you know anyone who would act so violently, with such little provocation?
 - (b) What would provoke a teenager to take such action?
 - (c) What type of teenager would never take such action, even if strongly provoked?
 Explain each answer and justify your opinions.
- ⑤ '**Hey, it wasn't bad writing that letter to you last night. Never written so much in my life**' (p. 5). Why would Tony want to continue writing?
- ⑥ '**You never would tell me why you hated me**' (p. 7). You are Miffy, explain why you hated Tony, and why you would never give him the reason.

Page references are to the Pan 1997 paperback edition of *Dear Miffy*.

- 7 **'I was more scared about that [breaking probation and the contract] than about making you a paraplegic for life' (p. 13).** Tony accuses himself of being **'a selfish bastard'**. Was Tony unusual or do we often, mostly or always think of how a situation affects us first?
- 8 **'I felt like I had nothing and you had it all' (p. 16).** Explain why Tony hated Miffy so much.
- 9 **'Like you'd tried to rip my face off and failed, and then he comes along and kind of rips it off anyway' (p. 17).** Explain exactly what Tony meant by his statement.
- 10 In John Marsden's *Checkers*, the main character says, **'Although we had a fireplace we never had a fire'**. Tony says, **'What did get me, though – and what I'll never forget – is how cold everything was' (p. 23).** Tony goes on to remark on the fake fire and the artificial plants. What does it take to make a house warm and welcoming?
- 11 According to Tony, everyone was out to give him a hard time – his aunt and uncle, the cops, the teachers (p. 27). How would it be possible for Tony to convince these people that he could be trusted? Would you trust him? Give reasons for your answers.
- 12 **'The thing is, when I write this, it's like I'm dreaming onto paper, I can escape into that past world where I used to live ... it don't seem so shitty after all' (pp. 33–4).** Tony is dreaming of the good times with Miffy, even though he admits that **'a lot of it sucked bad'**. How would his dreaming help Tony? How might it hold him back?
- 13 Tony said, **'No-one ever trusted me before' (p. 46).** What do you think never being trusted does to someone? Had Tony lost the right to be trusted?
- 14 John Marsden used the image of a floating island, **'You and I, we lived on an island that floated through the school, down the streets ... and no-one else could get on it' (p. 58).** In *So Much to Tell You*, Marina describes the girls at school as **'little dark islands floating in the shadows of the school, occasionally touching, bumping together for a moment or two' (p. 60).** Tony tells us that no-one could get onto the floating island with Miffy and him. Marina's islands touch occasionally. Is it possible to live on an 'island' forever. Why? Why not? Explain fully.
- 15 **'With your family you wouldn't have a clue what they thought about anything' (p. 63).** Tony, living in a totally different world, was used to a more basic style of communication. Did Tony misunderstand or was there no real communication between the members of Miffy's family? Give reasons for your opinion.
- 16 Tony refers to music: **'real threatening, real scary, ... it's like you can feel the wings of the dark angel' (p. 55), 'the loud ugly music' and the 'dark angel right there above us' (p. 69).** Did the story have to end the way it did? Was there really nothing Tony could do to stop the tragic conclusion to his story?



- 17 After the endless rain, Tony was going to see Miffy at her house. **'Wouldn't you think I would have felt those wings [the bad angel's], Miff?'** (p. 82). Why do you think Tony didn't hear the 'dark angel beating his wings' that day?
- 18 **'... them screams following me all the way down the stairs ... I can still hear them now, you know, Miff'** (pp. 84–5). Why was it that Miffy's screams were so haunting?
- 19 Why do you think that after Mr Hammond's visit, Tony made an effort and went to the gym (p. 88)?
- 20 **'I still don't know how I got it so wrong'** (p. 90). Explain fully what, in your opinion, were the reasons that Tony 'got it so wrong'.
- 21 **'Even the crowd that's cheering want you to fall over. They love you when you win but they love it even better when you lose'** (p. 91). Explain why you believe this statement is or is not a fair comment in Tony's case. Does this statement apply to you? Explain.
- 22 Do you think Tony was right in his assumption that Miffy used him **'as some kind of weapon against her mother'**? Explain.
- 23 John Marsden confronts the reader of *Dear Miffy* with many demanding issues and images. One of the final images is Tony seeing himself as a monster (p. 92). Explain why you think this image was used. Do you agree with the idea that Tony was a monster? Explain.




Think it through, talk it over

In groups or as a class, discuss one or more of these topics.

1 Discipline and sarcasm

'Well, well, well, all the usual suspects. And Miss Simmons, you've come along to make up the numbers, I suppose' (p. 3).

Is sarcasm a productive form of discipline? Why or why not?

Does sarcasm hurt? Give reasons.

Do the 'usual' forms of discipline help young people like Tony and Miffy? Explain.

What would help Tony to get it right?

2 Rights of students

'I just couldn't believe what was happening, that Hammond had opened my life to you like that' (p. 17).

What factors might have prompted Mr Hammond to mention probation?

Do you see any value in such a disclosure?

Do you think Tony is right when he says 'You can't beat these blokes'? (p. 17).

Given Tony's record, do you think he is entitled to protest? Explain.

Why is it important that boys like Tony be treated with dignity?

3 Facing the facts

'Like, you'd tried to rip my face off and failed, and he comes along and rips it off anyway. You know what I mean?' (p. 17).

What does Tony mean?

At the end of the interview, what is it that Tony has lost?

What do you think it is that Tony values? Explain.

Did the interview make Tony's situation better or worse than it had been? Explain.

What do you think Mr Hammond was trying to achieve by speaking of Tony's mother and brother?

4 Cold, fake, warm

'What did get me though – and what I'll never forget – is how cold everything was' (p. 23).

Is something that is new, but has been built to look old, really fake? Explain.

What does a fake do to reality? Explain.

Was Miffy's house less real than Tony's? Give reasons.

Was it the idea of 'fake' in Tony's mind that made Miffy's house cold? Explain.

How can a house that is well-heated be cold? Justify your opinion.

What is it that makes a house warm if it isn't the heating system? Explain.

Are coldness and warmth in your house or in your mind? Give details.

5 Pain and escape

Tony was desperately searching for a way out of his pain. 'I'm dreaming onto paper, I can escape into that past world where I used to live' (p. 33). 'I nearly went to a shrink ... he'd sort of look after me ... he'd stop them [the cops] from hurting me' (p. 99). 'This'll fix it all up, take care of things. No more pain after this' (pp. 110–11).

Can we really avoid pain by escaping or running? Explain.

If we escape into a dream, what happens when we wake?

What aspect of Tony's struggle do you think would be the most difficult for him? Why?

Did Tony think he was being realistic in his desire to escape to Queensland to this 'dream world, where no-one could get me and nothing'd go wrong'? (p. 103).

Do you think Tony was capable of somehow 'stopping this bad bad hurting feeling that I couldn't stand no more'? (p. 109). Explain.

Is there another way to relieve the pain and the hurt other than through anger, hate and dreaming? Explain fully.

ANYTHING GOES

Tony is hating, hurting and in unbearable pain. Miffy is, no doubt, in unbearable pain too. To capture such emotions will be a challenge. Try one or more of the following activities.



Miffy's story You are Miffy. Tell your version of the events from the moment Tony hit your mother (p. 84).



write an epilogue It is three years later. What sorts of lives are Miffy and Tony leading now?

choose a letter Tape yourself reading the letter you choose. Find three songs that would serve as a backing for your reading. Either include them on your tape or play them before and after the reading. Explain your choice of letter and music.



collage Make a collage to represent Tony's pain.



write a script Write a script of a conversation between Miffy and her brother and sister one year later.



imagine you are Tony Tony doesn't seem to have developed much insight into his problems. Imagine that one year later he has a much greater understanding of what happened and why he did what he did. You are Tony. Write to Miffy telling her of your new insights.



Miffy's family story What happened to Miffy's family? You are a friend of Miffy's and you are writing to another friend who has moved to another state. Tell your friend what happened.

