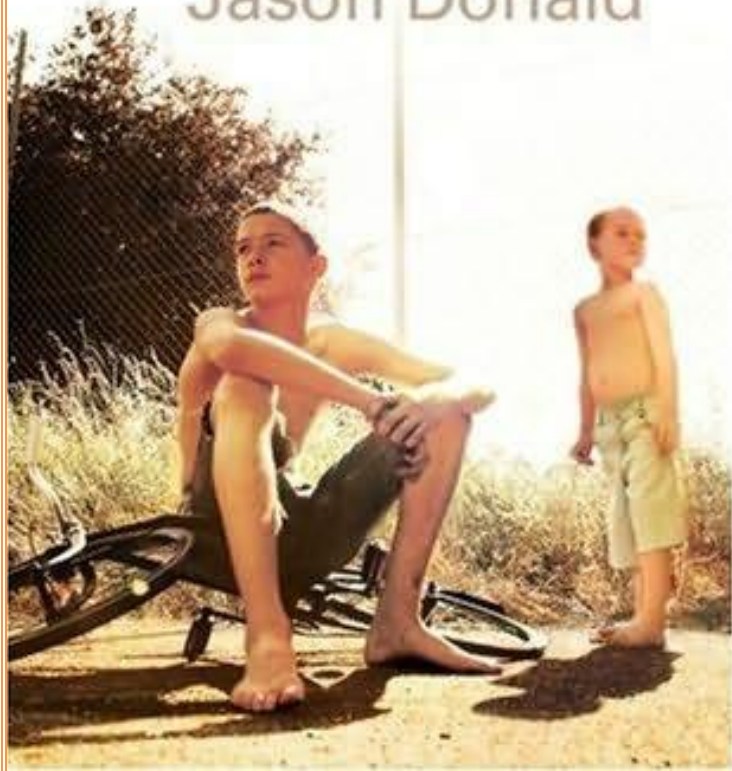


Choke Chain

Jason Donald



Teachers' Notes

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Note on the Text:

The text referred to throughout is published by *Jonathan Cape, 2009*

Introduction to this Resource

Scottish Book Trust Online Teacher in Residence is an online community and resource hub aimed at teachers in Scotland with a particular interest in creative learning for literacy within Curriculum for Excellence.

These class notes are offered free of charge, and are designed to support teachers looking for a new book to use with their pupils.

You can download more teaching resources at www.scottishbooktrust.com/otir where you can also participate in live and recorded online events, get free online CPD, and browse our section of case studies and articles via the Online Teacher in Residence blog.

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) intends to raise standards of achievement by improving teaching and learning with literacy as one of the key areas of focus. These materials suggest a range of activities that engage with literacy across the curriculum, using the narrative as a stimulus for a range of creative learning opportunities.

CfE gives pupil-led learning high priority, and working with novels may provide an excellent opportunity for pupils to design and drive their own learning, with facilitation from the teacher, using the narrative as a shared 'jumping off point' and framework.

Teachers are experienced at using stories with their pupils and since you know your pupils best, it may be that the work you do with your class takes you in a completely different direction from the ideas detailed below. It will follow that you will use the book in ways that meet the needs of your pupils and your local community.

These materials have been compiled using suggestions from the Scottish Book Trust Online Teacher in Residence Book Group.

Introduction to Choke Chain

This resource has been compiled to help teachers to use Jason Donald's novel, *Choke Chain*, as a classroom text. *Choke Chain* is a novel with real emotional punch. It tells the story of Alex, a twelve year old boy, living in South Africa at a time in the 1980s where apartheid still keeps blacks and whites apart. But despite the fact that this novel touches on the issues of race and division, its primary theme is the development of Alex as an individual. It is his inner struggle for a sense of life's certainties as his family falls apart, which captures the reader's heart and mind and which stays with us long after the final chapter. It is therefore a book which is relevant to any young person who is trying to find their place in the world; trying to discern which lights to guide them or simply trying to survive school life.

As a piece of contemporary literature, *Choke Chain* has many exciting possibilities to offer the English teacher but as a whole school resource it also has openings for other subject areas (Modern Studies, Art and Guidance) who touch on issues and ideas raised by the novel. As we embrace Curriculum for Excellence, I have highlighted the activities which meet the outcomes for English and Literacy (as well as SQA equivalent) and have aimed these activities at the **Fourth Stage – in particular, S3-4**. But I have also suggested possible directions for other departments/faculties should your school be looking for a source for a wider scheme of work.

As a classroom teacher, I have found the most useful resource packs to be based on a combination of whole class activities, group or individual tasks which cause genuine personal reflection on the text and a final outcome which relates to our core business - SQA externally assessed folios and examinations. I have therefore tried to cover all of these teaching needs in the activities which follow and I hope that you will find some of them useful. I have also included a couple of activities which use one chapter as a short story for close analysis. Donald's rich description evokes a wonderful sense of place and atmosphere and would be well worth dipping into as a model of creative writing, even if a teacher were not in a position to study the whole text.

I have found this novel to be highly engaging and genuinely moving: I hope you enjoy teaching it to your pupils.

CM – November 2010

Activity 1 – Hail – The opening of the novel



Prime students with a look at this YouTube clip of **Very Large Hail**: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZr8jXo1Uso>

Options:

Creative Writing: ENG 401A/L/W, LIT 424AB, LIT 425AC, ENG 426AD, ENG 430AH and Standard Grade W2 (Imaginative)/Int 2, Unit 1: Writing

Jason Donald's opening is an arresting description of an impending hailstorm and its destructive power. Either in groups or pairs, use the question sheet – **Worksheet 1A** - as a brainstorming activity. Answers could be written in notebooks or quotes could be written out as part of a wall display* to illustrate metaphor and the other creative writing techniques discussed. Once in possession of key techniques ask pupils to write a short descriptive piece depicting a storm using the senses to express the experience more fully. This can be developed as a piece of folio writing in itself or as the opening/climax/ending of a short story: encourage pupils to play around with where it might best open ideas for plot or character development – **Worksheet 1B**

[* *Hailstorm of Style* - Cut out circles of white paper as hail to use against a darker background and ask students to write out the phrase/image (s) they find most effective. This stylistic hail shower can be referred to whenever discussing other creative tasks and the effect of 'piling' images is visually represented to remind them] [Cross Curricular Link ART](#)
 Appendix 1

Close Analysis: LIT 412N, ENG 413P, ENG417T and Int 2 Textual Analysis/SG Close Reading

Use **Worksheet 1A** to work through the questions, encouraging pupils to see this is as relevant to exam/NAB practice, but as important, as a means of exploring how a writer creates atmosphere.

If using as a 'stand alone' lesson, encourage pupils to step back from the process of close analysis, and at the end discuss its power as a story opener. For example, what made them want to read on? What could they tell you about the characters? What do storms symbolise in literature/film? What might be the relevance of this storm? Etc.

The Opening as part of the whole novel: LIT 419V and Intermediate Critical Essay/SG Critical Evaluation (Prose)

Classes who are studying the whole novel as an exam text or for Standard Grade Folio will be keen to go back to the opening after reading the whole novel. The following *Intermediate 2* Critical Essay question from an SQA Past Paper encourages the pupil to explore the opening in relation to the events which follow:

Choose a novel or short story which has a striking opening. Show how the opening is effective in introducing the character(s) and/or the atmosphere and/or setting.

CHOKE CHAIN Worksheet 1A - The Opening of the Novel:

This activity asks you to analyse an extract which opens the novel. The questions should help to guide you through the techniques the author uses to create a sense of the powerful hailstorm approaching. The passage is on pp1-3.

1. Look at the opening paragraph.

'It dared us to move closer..'

What is 'it' and how does the writer use **personification** to emphasise the boys' vulnerable situation?

2. The writer's **word choice** is deliberately chosen to create a certain mood. Copying the table below, comment on the words/phrases which have been selected:

Word/Phrase	Effect
Cloudbank ..like a huge serving of grey cauliflower	<i>The writer compares the clouds to grey cauliflower which gives the impression of bad school meals, unappetising and far too much to consume. The effect is to create a heaviness in the atmosphere as this 'serving' is not a choice but a reality and it cannot be refused.</i>
Squat and heavy, waiting	<i>The clouds are also described as 'squat ' which gives the impression of.....</i>
..heavy on top but flat and septic yellow underneath	
The thunder grumbled	

The mood created is

3. What is your impression of the two boys in paragraph 3 (The thunder grumbled) – paragraph 6 ('Let's just keep going'). What details (write down evidence) show their differences?
4. Write down phrases from **before** the storm hits ('The tar was warm..') which appeal to our senses – taste, touch, sight, smell, hearing and **after** the storm breaks 'Our entire neighbourhood flashed..folded tightly across her chest'. You may wish to write your answers as a table to highlight the contrast.
5. Why do the boys disobey their mother's advice 'to go to the nearest house and wait..till the storm passed'? What impression is conveyed of the neighbourhood? How do Mom's **dialogue** and **actions** reveal the different expectations she has of the two boys?
6. Look again at the final paragraph. Pick out 5 **verbs** which convey the violence of the storm and discuss/explain how they give this impression.

Choke Chain: Worksheet 1B: The Storm in the Story. You have now explored writing a storm sequence. Think about where in the story you want to place it. Think about the changing impact and meaning it could have on plot, character and theme. Use this template to fill in the outline of your story.

<p>Exposition – A Storm at the opening sets a tense mood and perhaps prepares us for a theme of violence or an adventurous plot.</p>	<p>Complication – A storm at this stage in the story could provide a problem for your characters to overcome – a test of character?</p>
<p>Climax – often, a storm at the climax of a story symbolises emotional turmoil or arguments in the characters</p>	<p>Resolution – a storm at the end or conclusion of a story can provide a release of tension and an opportunity for the sun to shine</p>

Choke Chain: Worksheet 1C

Story Carousel



Another fun variation which requires a timer* and pupils in pairs or small groups is the **Story Carousel**. Give each group a copy of the short story planning grid (**Worksheet 1B**). Each group is given 5 minutes to write down an exposition (opening) but when the bell rings, they must pass their sheet on. Another group adds the 'complication' section and so it is passed on until all four sections have been completed. Pass on one more time to be read aloud by a final group/the teacher.

The elements of competition and time tend to keep motivation high while reinforcing the need for structuring a story. Pupils always enjoy hearing how their opening was developed or hijacked by others! Players can be given a 'storm card' which they can 'play' at any point in the game forcing the group who receives it to include the storm at that point in the writing process.



Storm Card - Cut out and play this card to force the group to include a storm in the plot NOW

*The 'Teachit Clock' on www.teachit.com is a useful tool if you have a smartboard in your classroom,.. bringing added time tension!

Themes

Choke Chain's **themes** focus on masculinity and the way Alex's development is affected by the violence and conflict surrounding him.

VIOLENCE and CONFLICT

The unmistakable air of violence and conflict hangs over the whole novel and begins with the very first line in the personification of the storm – 'It dared us to move closer' and the storm itself anticipates the deterioration of the family in 'we huddled together ..while our home disintegrated around us' p.3. Alex is at the heart of the storm which is brewing over his family, and his father, Bruce Thorne, is the obvious source of violence in the opening sequence of chapters.

CROSS CURRICULAR LINK



Guidance Departments could use extracts from chapters concerned with bullying and fighting to encourage discussion.

Character of Bruce Thorne

Described by others as a 'redneck', he sees people as 'winners or losers' and encourages his boys to fight and scam their way through life. He shows them a disturbingly corrupt approach to 'winning' and a self-centred attitude to those around them. He is a showman, described with his 'thumbs' in his denims 'as if he is wearing guns' and lives life by the slogans on his T shirts. His racist attitude is disturbing and he clearly enjoys any power he can inflict over others in positions below him. He uses language to manipulate, to cajole and to frighten. His abusive, coarse language to the boys is then copied by Alex when he is trying to be the 'man of the house' p.191. Dad's little 'plans' are often schemes to cheat others or to gain financially by bullying - but only those he knows he can intimidate such as the black woman at the supermarket or the waiter at the restaurant. He values survival instinct over rational thought and has little time for education. The line between violence and game is often blurred, as in the adult rated videos he inflicts on Alex, the torturer's game in **Barefoot** and in Kevin's sense of play. He has at the centre of all the violent episodes of the novel including the car fire, the violent playground fights, the car crash and the attack by Ten Bucks, the abused dog he brought to the house. He finally meets his match at the hospital where his bravado and egotistical behaviour make him a figure of ridicule and ultimately, an irrelevance.

Bullying

Kevin is an interesting character who, while vulnerable at school and bullied by other children, is quick to inflict pain on other creatures, notably in the insect Gogga Coliseum, but also in the destruction of the ants' nest ; his delight in seeing his brother suffer at the hands of Dad in **Barefoot** p.64 'Kevin – the traitor – laughing at me' suggests a worrying pattern of behaviour which if unchecked, might continue into adolescence. This coupled with his inability to express himself at times of high emotion culminates in the chapter **Teeth**, when Kevin's anger and frustration is unleashed on Ten Bucks with horrifying consequences for all. Alex is encouraged to defend his brother but in defeating Darrell, he shocks Charlene, the person whose good opinion he most wants. He also opens himself up to the spiral of revenge which he recognises later in **Cracks**.

Structure

The novel though episodic is made up of **three** clear sections with **Hail** as the prelude.

- **Pretoria** – home life – the neighbourhood and the development of the characters in Alex family; conflict at home, at school, in culture of Afrikaans v English, white v black, instinct v reason, male v female; overriding sense of tension even in the games being played. Alex's desire to escape and rise above the world he lives in is an emerging theme.
- **Durban** – change of setting – development of Mom's character and Alex trying to be the man of the family, emulating his father, but feeling the strain of this sitting uncomfortably. Emphasis on losing and regaining balance is present in language.
- **Pretoria** – home after Dad has left – the arrival of Ten Bucks – Alex begins to change and despite trying to be his father's son, is continually disappointed with the results and how they make him feel. Ultimately rejects his father and Ten Bucks in the wake of Kevin's tragic attack. Learns to live without the choke chain.

ACTIVITY

Structure could be explored through an activity based on pupils finding quotes from each stage of the novel which show the changing attitude of Alex to his father - these might be displayed as part of a whole class visual image of Alex. **LIT 419V**

The Conflict Within – Character of Alex

Alex is often described in the early stages of the novel as ‘torn’ and his desire to please his father is in conflict with his desire to behave in a more appropriate way as displayed by Mom. Mom’s initial passive manner is not always an attractive option for Alex who is drawn to the colourful character of his Dad. But as he is exposed to the darker side of his father’s personality and is expected to lie to his mother, his teachers and eventually the police, we see Alex in greater conflict with himself. His desire to escape and ‘float away’ in **Blue** is revisited in the beauty of the **Floating Mountain**. He finds it difficult to be in transition between primary school and high school, between child and adolescent, between Mom and Dad. His visit to Durban, however, reveals a happier, more dynamic side to his mother and though tears are shed in response to her failing marriage, she is seen at the end of the holiday to ‘float’ and we are given a clear impression that to Alex she is actually ‘calm and unsinkable’ p.178

‘How can you solve your differences by hitting each other,’ said Mom. ‘You have to learn to walk away, Alex’ p.168

The sequence **Grit p.158 - Jellyfish** is a beautiful extended metaphor on the sea. The way Alex responds to the waves is important: it represents the choice between his father’s approach to life – to fight the waves, ‘whatever it takes’, or Brandy’s - to roll with the natural order, rising up and ‘ducking the waves’ as they roll in. This whole section sees Alex questioning his place in the world. He is fed up only being treated as a grown up ‘when it suits other people’ ; he wants to go home and back to his field where he can escape. The beach is described as a ‘borderline’ p.156 and we get the sense that this is a crucial stage for Alex in the choices he will make. In the sea he is described as ‘trying to keep upright’. In the previous section in his fight ‘lesson’ he is described as ‘frantically searching for balance’p.83. The recurring imagery of **balance** helps to reinforce Alex’s vulnerability and the sense of his being pushed and pulled by different family and cultural forces. **Ask pupils to look closely at the dissection of the jellyfish p.169-70. What might it represent?**

H
o
w
e

Dad: ‘Winners and losers. Whatever it takes’ p.28

However, as his father has told him to be the ‘man in the family’ whilst away, his behaviour takes on an unpleasant macho character and the pretence is hard for the whole family to bear, particularly Kevin, who sees an unpleasant change in the brother he depends on p.191.

The family return to find their father gone. But Bruce replaces himself with a gift of a violent stray dog, Ten Bucks, which itself has been abused. Though Dad has left, the dog, with its vicious bite and terrorising persistent bark seems to replace his brutish presence. Significantly, the dog is given to Alex and it persecutes Kevin's domesticated puppy mercilessly.

The final chapters find Alex wrestling with the man he wants to be. His attempts to emulate his father result in a failed scam and arrest. His tears are a moving response to Alex trying to be something he is not. His friendship with Vim, respect for Charlene, support of Kevin and kindness to his mother reveal his truer nature. As he faces outer conflict at High School, he chooses not to fight back.

The final climax of the novel presents Alex with a choice and as his father's behaviour reaches repulsive heights of selfishness, Alex sees another way:

'Things had become too important and nothing I had learned from Dad was of any help to me now. When the time came I would need to find a far more powerful way to confront him' p.294, **Emergency Exit**.

As his father's final violent exit from the hospital drags Alex with him, he is clear that he does not want to go with him in any sense. ' I refused to back him up any more. I decided for myself now, and I wanted to be with Kevin'.

In the doctor – another male adult – Alex sees 'a calm certainty which was much more powerful than any of Dad's bluffs. I sensed immediately that I'd found a way to deal with DadI had the power to make him irrelevant'.

'Without moving or looking away, I showed him a side of myself that I'd always kept hidden, a side that was bigger than him. "Dad you're bad for us". **Emergency Exit**, p 302

At the close of the book Alex gets rid of Ten Bucks without remorse and the choke chain he was manipulated into buying for him has no purpose. Symbolising his own relationship with his father, the leash is now pointless and dangles with the collar 'collapsing in on itself until it finally vanished'. We get the sense that Alex will be all right and that he has already become the man he is striving to be.

Teaching Options: ENG 419V, Critical Evaluations/ Critical Essays

So many possibilities, so little time!

***An essay exploring the character development of Alex Thorne**

The development of Alex from boy to man is a clear area for critical evaluation and a character study following him through the 3 key phases of the novel – life as the Thorne family, Durban, home without Dad would be a useful place to begin. Such an essay cannot ignore the influence of his father on his behaviour, even when absent, and the two sides of himself which fight for his heart.

***An essay which considers the theme of violence or conflict**

The theme of violence in the novel provides a rich seam to explore in a Critical Evaluation. There are many layers of violence to discuss but its impact on Alex's progress would make a more challenging critical essay question for those approaching Int 2 or even Higher.

***An essay exploring the breakdown of the family**

This kind of essay would examine the differences represented by the mother and father and how the tension is established by the language and structure of the novel. Obviously Alex and Kevin's behaviour is a focus for the 'fall-out' of such domestic strife. Their changing attitudes to their father and mother would make an interesting study.

***An essay on key scene or moment of tension**

Favoured by Int 2 and Higher papers, the fantastic sequence of **Teeth** would make an excellent focus for an essay: its climactic place in the story and its consequences for the characters would give plenty of food for thought.

***An essay exploring minor character**






A class of mixed ability students may prefer to choose a character study of Bruce Thorne, fiercely unrepentant and therefore a straightforward, undeveloped character. His influence on Kevin, Alex and Mom could be compared and the significance of the choke chain discussed.

***An essay on symbolism - The significance of the novel's title etc**

Rich in symbols, this novel would provide a good introduction to this literary technique and as an extension, the opportunity for pupils to look at writing a symbolic short story of their own. (See **Worksheet 2** for further lesson ideas)

Choke Chain: Worksheet 2 - Symbolism

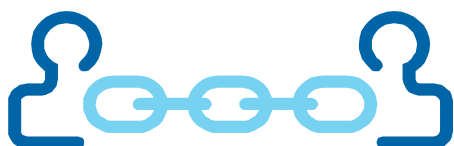
Look at the pictures on the left hand side. Can you think of what they might represent in the story. Find evidence (quotation) to support your ideas:

Symbol	Meaning
 <p>Storm p1-3</p>	<p>The storm at the opening is a symbol of the conflict in the story and the storm which is about to descend on Alex's family. It also implies a clash and as such emphasises the cultural clashes in society which underlie the family tensions.</p>
 <p>Choke Chain</p>	<p>Although Alex father no longer lives with them, he brings Alex a dog and persuades him to buy a good strong chain. How does it forge a link between father and son?</p>
 <p>The hole in the garden p. 45-7</p>	<p>'I kept thinking of mom digging, sinking deeper and deeper...' This incident occurs after Dad has persuaded Alex to lie to the police. How does this affect his mother and how does the hole seem to represent her feelings?</p>
 <p>Dog(s)</p>	<p>There are many references to dogs – Litchie, Ten Bucks, Dogs for Guarding, Dogs for fighting and sacrifice. Explore the role of Ten Bucks in final chapters.</p>
 <p>Floating</p>	<p>Floating is a recurring idea in the novel. What does it represent for Alex? For his Mother? What is the significance of the Floating Mountain?</p>

There are many other symbols including **the insects** and **anthill** which Kevin destroys, the **super hero cards**, the **ocean** and the **waves** and many other recurring ideas. See if you can comment on these.

Appendix One

Cross Curricular Links



Guidance:

There are several issues that are raised by the novel which naturally fall into the area of Guidance. Bullying, racism and family relationships are the more obvious areas for discussion, but there are also references to alcohol, peer pressure and playground fighting.

Art:

The opening sequence explores the storm in great detail. Artists have wrestled with the depiction of the power of nature over centuries and this may provide a link for an Art unit on the representation of the natural world or similar. African Art as an influence might also be an interesting line of study.

Modern Studies:

The current SQA syllabus covers South Africa and there are clear links for this novel with Modern Studies. Informative essays on apartheid, Nelson Mandela and other historical topics relating to South Africa would assist pupils in their understanding of Alex's cultural background and the relationship between the black South Africans like Rebecca, the Afrikaans South Africans such as Vim and the Thorne family who value their English roots.

I have not included specific Group Discussion worksheets, but clearly these issues would all provide great discussion material for our own Scottish pupils as they seek to understand the wider world.

Appendix Two

Interview with Jason Donald



For his debut novel, Dundonian Jason Donald has drawn on his summers as a child in South Africa to produce something, shocking, meditative and affecting. Claire Sawers meets him

'I found it difficult torturing an eight-year-old boy, but I knew I had to.' The couple at the table next to Jason Donald shoot him a sideways glance over the top of their coffee cups. He definitely doesn't seem like the torturing kind. He carries on, speaking in a gentle, slow mix of Glaswegian and South African vowels.

'The trick is creating a character that you're really rooting for. You grow to love him; you start finding him funny, or thinking he's cute. Then I had to do horrible things to him. That was pretty hard.'

Donald is not a sadistic guy. In fact when we meet in Glasgow's Rio Café, a few underground stops from where he lives with his wife, he's more of a smiling, intelligent, insist-on-paying-the-bill type of guy. But for his debut novel, an uncomfortable, moving look at one bullying dad's effect on his two young sons, he had to get inside the head of someone cruel and unusual.

Bruce Thorne is the man of the house, and he doesn't want his sons growing up to be sissies. In his world, being strong and streetwise means knowing how to scam your way into a free hamburger, winning the fight by always throwing the first punch, and generally showing the rest of the world who's boss.

'Bruce is the sort of guy that's always blameless,' explains Donald. 'He's not beholden to the rules; he's special. And if something goes wrong, it's the other guy's fault.' Raised on a diet of Chuck Norris movies and bare knuckle fights, 12-year old Alex and his younger brother Kevin spend their days hovering somewhere between awe and terror. With a ticking time bomb at the centre of the family, it's not long before Bruce's mood swings and lies cause the family to implode.

The action takes place in 1980s South Africa, where Donald spent his childhood. Born in Dundee, with a South African mum and Scottish dad, he moved to Pretoria aged two and returned to Scotland when he was 16. 'South Africa definitely has a sense of danger about it; a feeling of pressure building. You always have to watch your back.'

He remembers watching riots on TV, or being bullied by Afrikaans boys at school, but insists the book is not autobiographical. 'My childhood was fabulous, really. These aren't my memoirs, or some sort of revenge novel,' he laughs.

Although he admits his own father is 'a difficult man' who he hasn't seen for six years now, Donald says the book is fictional – sewn together from memories of his basketball coach, other kid's dads, or people he saw in the street. Before being published, it had already received praise from the author

Janice Galloway, won him a Scottish Variety Award nomination and secured him Scottish Arts Council funding for his second novel.

'I wanted to create this macho perspective on the world, seen by the kind of guy who wears t-shirts that say things like "I do all my own stunts" or "Female Body Inspector", and who thinks it's fine to teach his son a choke hold. Writing about my own life would have been far too restrictive.'

Donald realised he wanted his first book to explore masculinity and family relationships after spreading out all the short stories and poems he'd written while studying for his Masters in creative writing at Glasgow University. 'There were definite themes emerging. This same family kept appearing in my writing, with these same four people. I wanted to get closer to them and use them to discover some emotional truths.'

Although he admits he found it tough writing the passages where Bruce gets the upper hand over his sons, he also found it fun writing a character whose moral code comes from a distorted, old school notion of cowboy manliness. 'In his head he's some kind of hero, when actually he's just this small time guy, who gets a kick out of stealing a cup of coffee, or winning a wrestling match with a 12-year-old.'

Set under the purple jacaranda trees of a South African summer, with braais by the poolside or trips to the beach at Durban, the novel reads like a hazy, beautifully photographed Polaroid of childhood – albeit one that is slowly being crushed by Bruce's menacing grip. While there are dark moments in which Bruce tries to hammer his warped views home, there are also feather-light passages where the boys spend their afternoons swapping Marvel superhero cards, talking about computer games or doing wheelies on their bikes.

'I think a lot of writers from South Africa, just like writers from Bosnia or Northern Ireland, often feel some sort of responsibility to write about the politics of that place,' says Donald. 'I deliberately wanted to write something very domestic instead. But I also wanted to let the reader feel what it's like to live inside this comfortable, white bubble.'

Although he focuses on the power trip of a bad father, Donald thinks Bruce's superiority complex is the sort of mentality that also leads to sexism, racism and bigotry. 'It's back to that thing of blaming the 'other' guy, whether it's a woman, or a black man, or someone who talks a different language. Walking about with that attitude, sooner or later it's going to find an outlet somewhere,' he shrugs.

Growing up under apartheid, Donald saw first-hand the 'complicated moral positions' that people often found themselves in. Like the Thornes in *Choke Chain*, Donald's family had a black, live-in housekeeper. 'If a family gives work to a black woman who has three kids to support, are you helping them? Or are you just strengthening the apartheid system? Are you reinforcing the 'slave and master' stereotype, and taking away their dignity?' He deliberately kept politics as a backdrop to the main plotline, though, as he wanted to 'show things, rather than deliver a lecture.'

He hopes the book will raise a few questions about gender politics and family life. 'I love films like *The Squid and the Whale*, [director Noah Baumbach's true recollection of living through a divorce in 1980s Brooklyn] where you see a family breaking up from all angles. I wanted to show the struggle of all the characters to find their sense of what's the right and the wrong thing to do.'

Donald has already started work on book two, a Glasgow-set story of asylum seekers, but is excited to see how readers react to the Thorne family.

'The best thing would be knowing that people are left wondering how the characters are getting on after they close the book.'

***The List*, February 2009**