

# Don't Call Me Ishmael!

Michael Gerard Bauer

Michael Gerard Bauer's second novel for young adults reveals a wonderful comic talent. Written in a vernacular style, the book is very much a school story as well as a comedy, and demonstrates Michael's long familiarity with boys in boys' schools and how they speak to each other. The teacher characters, although for the most part in the background, are particularly well realised. The story is told predominantly in dialogue, and the first-person narration makes for direct and immediate storytelling. Set-piece scenes in the novel, such as the rugby match won by the enthusiastic Peter Chung, and Ishmael's maiden debate, where he struggles not only with his indecipherable palm cards but also his underpants, are very, very funny.

Readers of *The Running Man* will also enjoy the literary allusion (this time to *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville) and the same preoccupation with common humanity, of being kind to others even when they are not very good or admirable people.

Michael's son Joe provided the collage that features on the cover.

## Synopsis

In this funny school story with a difference, Ishmael is fourteen and in Year Nine. He has come to the attention of class bully Barry Bagsley, and is having a crisis of confidence. He is suffering from Ishmael Leseur's Syndrome, which is simply the problem of being someone with an unpronounceable name – inspired by his parents' reading of *Moby Dick*. He soon meets salvation in the form of new boy James Scobie who, although geekish and slight of stature, has near-genius intelligence – and a total lack of fear. Scobie encourages Ishmael and an assorted bunch of other misfits to band together as the Year Nine debating team. Ishmael struggles with his terror of public speaking and even meets a girl before Scobie mysteriously disappears and leaves the team

to debate in the finals. Ishmael finds the courage to participate. And finally he is confident enough to take the fight to Barry Bagsley; he can almost taste revenge for the humiliation he and others have suffered. The results are unexpected.

**Notes for teachers**

- The theme of bullying strong in the book: the name-calling, the victimisation of those who are different or less able socially are both ways that Barry Bagsley finds to belittle others. Class discussion could be based on a consideration of the characters and the different ways they deal with bullying. The bullying is done for no understandable reason, as the author shows. What would be other ways to combat bullying?
- Teamwork is demonstrated in the novel in the boys' efforts to present a united front for their debating team. Perhaps a formal debate with four speakers against and four speakers for the affirmative could be arranged to discuss such questions as: 'That unchecked bullying in schools leads to world conflict'; 'That intelligence always overcomes brute force.'
- Students could emulate Prue Leseur's peg people and create their own versions of world leaders, or famous actors or musicians, and present them in class, describing why they chose the person, and their achievements.