



Teachers' Notes

Written by Suzanne Wilson

THE DONS

Archimede Fusillo

About The Book

Archimede Fusillo's story about a teenage boy and his grandfather opens with the rather unlikely situation where Nonno, who's in his seventies and doesn't have a driver's licence, admits to stealing a Porsche. A brand new shiny red Porsche Carrera. It turns out that Nonno actually did take a Porsche from his local Italian Club – a model, still boxed, and it's sitting on his wardrobe in his bedroom. It's just one of the many incidents in which Nonno gets confused. He's old and becoming frail and he's getting worse as the days go by.

Paul, on the other hand, is nearly fifteen and he wants a life – a life outside the constraints necessarily set by his home life. He shares a bedroom with his nonno, his father died in an industrial accident five years ago, and his mother is struggling to bring him up and look after Nonno all at the same time. Paul is more interested in dating Tracey, the coolest girl in the school. He doesn't want to spend the weekend looking after Nonno and helping his zia Rita with her garage sale. Zia Rita doesn't want to have to be bothered with Nonno at all – she just can't cope with him losing his mind. So she avoids him as much as she can, which annoys Paul and leads him into trouble. When he mentions to Rita at the garage sale that she should look after nonno more, Rita says that he should be in a home. Nonno overhears this, and decides to go for a wander. No one can find him – except Paul. He finds him later that night, sitting in the cemetery where Paul's father is buried. He tells Paul that he was looking for sheep for him to give to Tracey as a kind of dowry – that's the sort of thing he did in Italy when he was a boy.

Nonno's lapses into the past like this are often humorous, but they also disturb Paul. And they begin to reveal things about Nonno that Paul never knew. Tragic things, and amazing things. That Nonno has some vivid and disturbing memories from his childhood; that he saw his uncle shot and strung up by Mussolini's blackshirts; that he was punished for smoking his father's cigarettes and that, because of the smoking, he was unable to sing at his uncle's funeral – a guilt he carries with him to this day. Paul is both amazed and angry at Nonno for burdening him with a past that he really doesn't want to acknowledge. So angry, in fact, that Paul smashed Nonno's precious collection of aftershave bottles. It is only after this painful incident that Nonno reveals to Paul his most precious possession – the medal of distinction he won as a young boy for his remarkable talent at music and his extraordinary singing voice.

In the end, Paul understands Nonno so much more: understands his life, can see him not just as an old man who's losing his mind, but as a man who was once the same age as himself, who once chased girls and got into trouble, just like him, and had likes and dislikes and talents and weaknesses. Suddenly Tracey and her superficial world seem unimportant. His suspicions are confirmed when he overhears Tracey making fun of Nonno. Paul decides to face up to this and tell her exactly what he thinks of shallow, superficial people like her. And after he puts Tracey in her place, and as part of his school project, Paul invites Nonno to his class to tell them about his past and his music. At the end of the story Paul and his nonno truly are the Dons, two men with dignity and respect and time for each other, despite being separated in age by well over half a century.

Themes

Archimede Fusillo's novel presents a number of themes for students to explore. The following categories and questions will provide some stimulus for discussion and project work:

Age and senile dementia

How old are Nonno and Paul? What are some of the things that most concern Nonno about his life at the moment? What are some of the things that concern Paul about his life at the moment? How close are they? What sort of conflicts do they experience with each other?

Research the condition of senile dementia – what is it? There are a number of organisations that can provide information on dementia – contact these and compile the information into a class information booklet. How is memory affected by the condition? How is Nonno's memory affected? What other characteristics of the condition does Nonno present? The author portrays this illness using dignity and humour – highlight some passages from the book that indicate this to the reader.

World War II atrocities

Read chapter 16. What tragic event does Nonno relate to Paul about his past in Italy? Are there any other novels and/or films which deal with similar incidents from World War II?

Youth culture

What sort of youth culture does Paul enjoy? What are his favourite pastimes, friends and school activities? How does this conflict with his home life?

Italian culture

What sense of the Italian culture do you get from the story? What are taralli, grappa, bocce, briscola? What other details tell us that Paul's family is Italian?

Death and grieving

How does Paul cope with the death, five years earlier, of his father? How did he die? Grieving is an important theme in the story? Who is Nonno still grieving for? How does he cope with his loss? Why does Paul find it so hard to accept the idea of his mother dating a policeman?

Family life

The novel deals with many family centred themes: responsibility, loyalty, love, respect. The copyline on the front of the book says, 'You can never escape family'. What does this suggest about Paul's sense of place in his family? What does it suggest about Nonno's past and his ties with past events and memories? How important is the idea of escaping in this novel? Read the quotation from Paul at the very beginning of the novel? What ideas and themes are suggested by this quotation?

The Title

What does the title *The Dons* suggest? How does this tie in with the main themes of the novel? Who are The Dons? How would you define the word? The Macquarie Dictionary provides a number of definitions: A man of high rank; a Spanish lord or gentleman; a person of great importance, a tutor of a college; the leader of a Mafia family. Which of these titles sheds relevance onto the main themes of the book?

Writing Style and Language

There are a number of passages in italics throughout the book. How do these passages work and what do they tell us about Paul and his thinking?

Read chapter 15. How does the author use language and dialogue to suggest the different ways in which Paul and Nonno speak? How does the writer convey the sense of Nonno talking in English and then in his native Italian?

How important is humour in *The Dons*? Highlight a passage that you find funny. Highlight a passage that you find sad. Why?

The Characters

Compare and contrast some of the main characters in the novel. Which of the following characters do you like most? What are their central characteristics?

Paul

Nonno

Paul's mother Teresa

Zia Rita

Tracey

Activities

- Look at the cover of the book. What does it tell you about the story? What does it suggest about relationships? What sense of the past is presented?
- Research the period in Italian history that Nonno talks about. Who was Mussolini? Who were the blackshirts? Why would culture, music and singing have been important to that culture during the war?
- Interview a grandparent or a person who has lived through World War II. What are their memories? What songs or music do they remember from that period?
- Read the quotation from 'Ulysses' by Tennyson that forms the epigraph to the novel. What important theme is touched on here?
- The book is dedicated to the author's nonna. What does this dedication suggest about the migrant experience? Where is Viggiano and how different would this be to Melbourne? Trace the route that an immigrant's ship might take between these two locations. What might they see on the way? How long would the trip take? In the 1940s and 1950s, when many Italian immigrants came to Australia, what would the experience have been like? Research this topic – consult books/videos such as *Tales from a Suitcase* and other recently published books about the migrant experience.
- Read Archimede Fusillo's other novel for young adults, *Sparring with Shadows*. What similar themes, if any, are explored in this book?

About The Author

Archimede Fusillo was born in Melbourne to Italian immigrant parents. Since completing a Bachelor of Arts and Honours degree in Psychology at the University of Melbourne, he has worked as a teacher and features writer for two international magazines. Many of Archimede's short stories have been published in Australia's leading magazines and journals, and he has won several awards for his work, including the Alan Marshall Award and the Mary Grant Bruce Award for Children's Literature. He has published several textbooks for students and teachers.

Archimede Fusillo's concerns about traditions being lost in the modern world, and about grandparents and their stories disappearing, formed the basis for Paul and Nonno's story in *The Dons*.

Archimede lives with his wife, Pina, and their two young children, Alyssa and Laurence, in Melbourne's outer suburbs. His first novel, *Sparring with Shadows*, was published in 1997 and was nominated in the Literature Category of the prestigious Italy in the World Awards 2000.

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