



# ROAD TO NHILL

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## STUDY GUIDE

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# ROAD TO NHILL STUDY GUIDE

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## SYNOPSIS:

**ROAD TO NHILL** tells the story of what happens when four lady bowlers are involved in an accident on a country road on their way home after a day's bowling in Quambatook. Margot (Lynette Curran), Carmel (Lois Ramsey), Nell (Monica Maughan), and Jean (Patricia Kennedy) are trapped in the car when it flips over.

From here there is a great deal of confusion around town. No one knows for certain who is in the car, how bad the accident is, or where it is. The ambulance goes out one road, the fire truck goes out another and Bret (Matthew Dyktynski), the local policeman, who is otherwise preoccupied, almost misses the whole thing. Husbands of bowling ladies go in all directions in search of their wives. Helpful (or not so helpful) passers-by take the women involved in the accident in other directions. Everyone has a different version of the events. Maurie (Paul Chubb) thinks he has sorted it out, Bob (Bill Hunter) thinks he has got it straight, although his wife Gwen (Denise Roberts) thinks otherwise. Eventually everyone is back in their right place and harmony returns to the town. The emergency is over. Life returns to normal - almost.....

The director, Sue Brooks, says that ' **ROAD TO NHILL** tells a story about fate. This is a warm laconic story with a real sting in its tail. I like the heart of the film. Mum used to often say 'his or her heart is in the right place' and that was always enough said. I think **ROAD TO NHILL's** heart is in the right place. I hope people can enjoy it for that.'



## CURRICULUM LINKS:

ROAD TO NHILL is relevant for students and teachers of English, Drama, Media studies, Australian studies and Studies of Society and Environment at the secondary school level.

## PRODUCTION INFORMATION ABOUT THE FILM:

ROAD TO NHILL was filmed in the small country town of Pyramid Hill in north Victoria in 1995. The director, Sue Brooks, was born and raised in Pyramid Hill (population 700). Sue and the writer, Alison Tilson, often visit there. Alison says that: 'We enjoyed listening to Sue's Dad's yarns. He has that particular style of story-telling that draws you in slowly and plays with you. As the story unfolds, there's always an amusing aspect but there's also always a serious aspect. That became the basis of the film - the concept of the small country town and yarn telling - not only how things happen and are connected and are everybody's business, but equally how stories are told. We decided there was a great film there and developed an outline.'

The producer, Sue Maslin, commented that: 'All three of us had grown up or lived in country towns. We felt the script offered something different from the caricatures of country people that often emanate from city-bound scriptwriters and

producers. The characters were really dear to us, they reflected people we knew or experiences that we had. In the country things happen, whether it's flood or drought or car accidents - country towns are the sites for great adversity but they are also the sites for great storytelling and the humour that grows out of adversity.'

The filmmakers first started working on this film in 1991. They received script development from the Australian Film Commission (AFC) and production funding (from the AFC and Film Victoria.)<sup>1</sup> Ronin Films, the distributor, made a P & A Guarantee after reading the script. It is not unusual for films to take a long time in development before they appear on cinema screens.

- Find out what the function of government bodies such as the Australian Film Commission is and why they support Australian film production.
- This is a low budget feature (made for two million dollars) and would be described as an 'independent film'. What is the difference between a mainstream commercial film and an independent film?
- What is a P & A Guarantee and why is it important?

## THE CHARACTERS IN THE FILM:

Bill Hunter who plays Bob in the film, commented that: 'There is a level of character that breeds in a small

community that you just don't find in the city. The script was just about a day in the life of a country town. That appeals to me. I don't think it's been done before, not in a feature film anyway... it reminds me of the country town where I grew up.'

Actor Paul Chubb who plays Maurie says... 'The characters are so well defined - the most vibrant I have read in the last five years. And it is funny. What we call straight comedy. The less you try for the laugh, the funnier it is. I guess the story itself could take place anywhere but the way it's dealt with and the characters involved - you can't mistake it for anything but Australian'

## Activities:

- Divide your class into pairs to look closely at the principal characters and write profiles on what you learn about the different characters in the film. Can you describe the ways the script and the way the actors are directed. Define the characters, and how they are all connected. Can you find evidence in the script and in the film of different kinds of relationships? Make sure that you include:
  - Jim: (Tony Barry) the concerned husband of Nell who does a lot of driving looking for Nell
  - Jill: (Vikki Blanche) the wife of Bret, the local policeman, who keeps trying to track him down

- Maurie: (Paul Chubb) a pig farmer who is the first at the scene of the accident.
- Margot: (Lynette Curran) one of the four lady bowlers and the driver of the car
- Bret: (Matthew Dyktynski) the elusive policeman.
- Bob: (Bill Hunter) the local stock and station agent who wanted to play a bigger role in the events.
- Jean: (Patricia Kennedy) the lady bowler who was the last out of the car and then left to wait with the pigs in the truck.
- Jack : (Alwyn Kurts) husband of Jean who has trouble getting the cups of tea right for Bob.
- Nell: (Monica Maughan) the first of the four lady bowlers to crawl out of the car.
- Ted : (Terry Norris) husband of Carmel and chief of the local fire brigade.
- Carmel : (Lois Ramsey) the lady bowler who is hoisted into the fire truck and taken to hospital.
- Gwen: (Denise Roberts) wife of Bob, and the power behind the stock and station agency.
- Alice: (Kerry Walker) Margot's partner and the organist for the local church.
- Brian: (Bill Young ) the farmer who fancies Margot and grows vegetables in an old bath.

- Choose a character and write about how three other characters feel about him or her.
- Write a series of reports on the accident from the different points of view of the characters in the film. Include comments which you think they might have made about the accident.
- Bret is described as 'irresponsible' and 'negligent' in the film. Write a fuller description of his character.

#### HUMOUR AND COMEDY IN 'ROAD TO HILL':

Monica Maughan who plays Nell, one of the four lady bowlers says: 'It's the most wonderful script. It is so gently funny. It's a slice of life film, a day in the life of a country town and to me it is very essentially Australian. I think Alison Tilson managed to capture real Australian language, and the irony - that really slow



gentle irony of Australian humour. The visual jokes are fabulous, they are not thrown at you, they're there for all to see'.

Most of the comedy relies on the women's reactions, their looks create the humour. The men carry the story, but the women make a lot of the running. However the women backtrack so it looks like they haven't. Although the men stumble, this is made funny by the women's wry or exasperated looks. The writer, Alison Tilson, thinks the funny part isn't Brian falling into the fridge, but rather, the way the women don't move. Most of us would probably tell him to take us home but the women have a way of

suggesting things to the men so that they think it is their idea, and allowing things to happen at their own pace.

There are various levels of humour in the film. For example, there are many subtle moments such as when the women look knowingly at each other, farcical visual humour as we watch from the sky as Jim just misses the car Nell is in, or the dead-pan crash sequence where although they are frightened that the car might blow-up, the danger is undercut by the funny way the camera is looking at them.

- What scenes in the film made you laugh? Note whether it is the dialogue, or something else which happens in the scene.



- Select scenes in the film which are visually funny rather than relying on the dialogue for their humour. Talk about how the humour has been created by the filmmakers.

- Some scenes could be better described as tragic-comedy. Jean has an enormous suitcase for her overnight stay in hospital. Her husband seems to be more worried about his bowls game than Jean. Could this be described as tragic-comedy? What other scenes are like this?

Films are constructed within national, social, and cultural contexts. In his review of *Road to Nowhere* in *Variety*<sup>2</sup>, David Stratton stated that he thought it questionable whether audiences overseas would appreciate the jokes.

The film has been screened at 18 different festivals around the world including India, Brazil and Singapore. The filmmakers attended Canadian, French, German and Greek festivals and found that the humour travelled well. The audiences laughed and laughed. The thing you can't be sure of is are they laughing at the same thing?

- Why might a joke be understood in one culture and not another? Can you think of any examples in *Road to Nowhere*?

#### REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER IN 'ROAD TO NOWHERE':

Gender is an important issue in *Road to Nowhere*. In the press kit for the film, the director, Sue Brooks, has said that :

'Even though the bulk of the script covers only a few hours in these people's lives the actors needed to create a web of relationships that would span decades. There is a lot of water under the bridge between them. There is a lot of ritual between the women and the men.'

The men all refer to the women as 'girls' but the girls don't take offence at being patronised (however, the audience notice it.) Many of us might wonder why the women just look at each other and don't say anything (such as at Brian's farm when all they want to do is go home and he is falling over tomatoes.) What the filmmakers have tried to do is to show us

how people of a particular 'ilk', both women and men, move gently around each other and how people who have lived together for long periods of time develop a way of communicating without speaking.

- Below are two examples, can you think of others?

1. The first actors we see are Bill Hunter (who plays Bob) and Denise Roberts (who plays Gwen, his wife.) Bob (the stock agent) tells the story in flashback and Gwen sits. She isn't going to interrupt. That isn't her role. None of the women interrupt the men. This doesn't mean they don't have their say. She has plenty to say in that scene but she never says a word because to interrupt him would be moving outside the role of what a woman (as she sees herself) should do. However, she manages to undercut without saying a word, 'her pained sideways glances tell us all we need to know.'<sup>3</sup> She lets him go because it is his prerogative as the town storyteller. Sandra Hall says



of this 'if he's such a gifted performer, why is his wife regarding him as if he had all the charm of a long-dead fish? Men talk; women do.'<sup>4</sup>

2. When the women have got Jean out of the car, Nell says to Maurie (Paul Chubb) that the window 'seemed to give all of a sudden.' Nell is trying not to shame Maurie and Brian but they don't notice. Maurie says 'that happens, that' and he then exclaims, 'didn't think we were going to do it.' The women just look at each other but don't say anything. This is the filmmakers' take on gender relations.

The younger people in the film seem to relate in a different way and don't seem in sync with the flow and rhythm of the town, especially Bret (the policeman.) Jill the policeman's wife acts – she leaves and she may or may not come back. When Sandra's husband is away a lot, she gets a young lover (the policeman.)

- Do you agree with the statement above, is there a difference in the representation of different generations?
- Do you think Gwen would leave Bob as Jill left Bret?

Lynette Curran who plays Margot says of her character that :

Margot is a friendly person, she loves animals, doesn't want to hurt anyone, there are lots of secrets in this film, she is being pursued by someone but she doesn't want his attention.

- What is Margot's secret? Why do you think she keeps it secret?
- Do you think that Margot knows that Brian is romantically interested in her?
- Do other characters have secrets? Are they as well kept as Margot's?

### 'ROAD TO NHILL' AS A CRITIQUE OF HEROISM

There have been criticisms of the film for portraying all men as incompetent. Critic Adrian Martin wrote that one of the guiding themes was that 'all men are drongos.'<sup>5</sup>

He is not alone in getting this initial impression. Tony Barry who plays Jim,

Nell's husband, was quoted in the press kit for the film as saying the film is the:

Mere Men's page turned into a movie. When I first looked at the script I turned it down. But then Sue Maslin asked me to look at it again and I did and recognised the humour. It examines the shortcomings in the male persona but does it with a good heart. There's an unspoken law that men deal with their own issues - it's part of that macho image that Australian men nurture and guard. It's only in the quiet moments that they allow their guard to drop and show their inner feelings.

Matthew Dyktinski who plays Bret says of his character that :

Bret Whitton is a young man with just about everything - a gun, power, and a fast car with sirens. In fact, the only thing he's lacking is a bit of common sense.

The filmmakers' response (to criticism that the film is anti-male) is to say that if everyone had been competent they would have got it done and there wouldn't have been a story. They say that it is unusual to see it this way round - that it is upside down. The myth is that the big strong men will come and undertake the rescue against all odds, but it isn't always like that when you are the one being rescued.

- If you were Maurie, first on the scene at an accident, what would you do? Do you think you might panic a bit?

The filmmakers feel that this reception is a reaction to the film's unusual perspective, that of laughing at ourselves rather than celebrating heroics. They say that it is only meant as a wry smile and not without affection or identification. The writer of the film, Alison Tilson, says that she sees many of the men as competent in their own way. Brian Broad grows fabulous vegetables and is a competent farmer, he gets them home, but he is socially inept with the woman he loves (we might all find we are nervous around people we really like.)

There isn't a hero in *Road to Nhill*. Most films or stories have a hero/heroine, a

main protagonist. The 'Dad's Army' style fire brigade, the Casanova policeman, the misdirected ambulance drivers drinking coffees, and the farmers - none of them fulfil a heroic image. This is the story of a community, not an individual.

- Discuss this film as a critique of the hero myth. What is the hero myth? How does it usually work in stories? Why doesn't it apply in this film?

### THE SETTING OF ROAD TO NHILL:

#### Activities

- Locate Pyramid Hill in your atlas. Look at a physical geography map and then comment on the terrain around the area.
- What impression do you gain of the main employment activities in and around the town?
- Write a description of the setting after watching the film.
- What time and year is the film set in? How do you know?

#### Country community life:

The producer, Sue Maslin, has said that she feels that *Road To Nhill* portrays country people as resourceful and united. 'The script offered something different from the caricatures of country people that often emanate from city-bound script writers and producers. The characters were really dear to us, they reflected people that we know or experiences that we had. Country people are often portrayed either as hicks or wise old sages'<sup>6</sup>

- What do you think about Maslin's view?
- Can you think of other films or television programmes which represent Australian people in the country? If you can, compare them with the characters in *Road to Nhill*.

Country people, especially farmers, have a different way of looking at things. They deal with life and death every day, they treat sick animals and sometimes have to kill injured animals. The film affectionately regards the characters and applauds the feeling of community they have achieved.

- What do we find out about country life from this film?



#### *Examples:*

One of the things the film is about is not burning bridges, people are in for the long haul - their relationships are going through until death. They'll be neighbours until they die so they can't burn bridges in the way we are inclined to do in the city. This makes people patient and tolerant of each other, more than in the city.

- Can you think of any examples of this in the film?

One of the things the film tells us about country life is that small things go a long way. Everyone knows about the accident and everyone is interested. Accidents happen around people in cities all the time but they are not aware of them. In a small community everyone knows everyone else's business (for example, Bob knows where the policeman is when his wife is looking for him.)

- Why is it often so important for the local people to know everyone's business and daily activities? What can be the negative and positive aspects of this?
- How does the news of the accident travel around the town? Can you chart the progress of the news?

The setting of Pyramid Hill shares many common characteristics with countless other small country communities.

- What do you learn in the film about what shops and community facilities and services are available to the local townspeople?

- Why do you think bowls is such a popular community activity?
- What other community activities do the people share in?
- What impression do you gain about how concerned members of the community are about each other?
- In what ways do you think country life can be different from city life?
- Choose a character and say how that character is like you.

#### Library research:

- Ask your librarian to suggest further reading dealing with country life and people, for example. 'The Drover's Wife' by Henry Lawson, which is a 19th century story, and 'Diary of a weekend Farmer', by Elizabeth Jolley which is a contemporary story. Locate stories and describe what similarities and differences these stories have when compared with *Road To Nhill*. (See the later section in this guide on 'References which have influenced the making of this film' for further research ideas.)

#### AFTER WATCHING THE FILM :

In small groups talk about these questions or prepare written responses:

- Did you enjoy the film? Which parts of the film did you enjoy most?
- What is your theory about why the accident happened?
- What were the partners of the four lady bowlers doing when the accident occurred?
- How did you feel when you saw the four women trapped upside down in the car?
- What were the different reactions of Jean, Nell, Carmel and Margot to being trapped?
- Maurie is the first on the scene. How does he react? Are his actions appropriate?
- When the alarm sounds in the town, what happens? What were the various men doing at the time?
- When the men arrive, how effective is their involvement? Why do you think they took credit for the rescue?
- Why is there a difference of opinion about whether Carmel should be moved?
- Meanwhile, what happens to Jean?
- What impression do the filmmakers create of the men from the Country Fire Authority?



- Later in the evening, the film explores the relationships of the four women with their partners and families. Describe each of these relationships.
- What effect do you think the accident had on each of the four women?

The more serious themes:

A number of serious themes emerge in the film, but often in a very understated way.

Talk about these questions:

- What could have been more serious outcomes in the accident?
- Why did the ambulance take the wrong road?
- How should accident victims be handled after an accident like this?
- What impressions do we gain about how the spouses and families cope with the accident?
- Was any concern shown by any of the characters about the state of shock the victims would be in?
- Should all the women have been taken to hospital? Why or why not?
- What is the serious theme of the film? What makes you think this?
- Why do you think Nell died?

- Why do you think the writer has left it inconclusive?

#### MEDIA STUDIES:

The logistics:

The logistics involved in making *Road the Nhill* were unique. The producer, Sue Maslin, commented that: 'A \$2 million budget is low when you take into consideration that it was eight weeks location filming in far north Victoria involving more than 60 people on location, a number of car stunts and helicopter filming. All those factors made it an extremely big challenge.' Director Sue Brooks concurs: 'We set out to do something pretty impossible. We had this idea that we would have a film that spanned the course of 2 or 3 hours. At the start of the film the sun is going down - most of the film happens before everyone goes to bed that night... Then we had the helicopter shots to capture the feeling of looking down... It was not until we got up in the air that we realised that trying to hold a helicopter still is like trying to hold a bicycle still in the air, especially difficult when there is a forty knot wind.

'We were working with a lot of very high winds. We often had situations where the actors couldn't even hear each other's performances let alone anyone else on set. The wind was so strong that at one point the helicopter couldn't go up again, so we had to wrap up the whole crew and go back again a month later. That's when we finally got our opening and closing sequences'

Note :

(These activities could be either individual, pairs, small group work or whole class discussion.)

- Try to define some of the challenges that the filmmakers would have faced. Think about the on-location planning, cast and crew needs, arrangements with the local community, weather conditions, light changes and other factors.
- Think carefully about and describe the difficulties the filmmakers would have faced in filming the car scenes. Why would they have needed two cars?
- How do you think the upside down women were filmed?





References which have influenced the making of this film:

Film production and filmmakers exist within cinema history and emerge from a complex interaction of bureaucratic, technological, intellectual and personal forces. The filmmakers were influenced by a number of other productions and sources. Students may wish to undertake some comparative study of some of these influences. *For example* : the films which influenced the writer and the director were films such as :

*Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975), *Sunday Too Far Away* (Ken Hannam, 1975), *Bitter Springs* (Ealing Studios- Ralph Smart, 1950), *The Overlanders* (Ealing Studios-Harry Watt, 1946), *The Lavender Hill Mob* (Ealing Studios- Charles Crichton, 1951), *Newsfront* (Phillip Noyce, 1978), *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950), *Magnificent Ambersons* (Orson Welles, 1942), *Landslides* (Sarah Gibson, 1986) and various films from directors such as Chantal Ackerman, Mike Leigh and Ken Loach.

If we look closely at some of these films we can see numerous shared elements.

- *Nashville* has multiple story strands (as does *Rashomon*) and doesn't have a main character or hero but focuses on a community.

- *Rashomon* also has a framing device, the story being told at 'Heaven's Gate' and *Road to Nhill* has the 'voice of God'.

- *Sunday Too Far Away* has a very Australian laconic style of performance (a style the director hoped to achieve with *Road to Nhill*), and it tells a story where there is a sense of a whole 'world' operating, where characters have backgrounds and histories to which the audience are not necessarily privy.

- The Ealing Studio films influenced the filmmakers in that they were character based comedies; the characters play it straight, they are deadly serious while the audience is left in hysterics (earlier in this guide Paul Chubb is quoted having described the film as 'what we call a straight comedy'.) Alison Tilson (the writer of *Road to Nhill*) says a film such

as *The Lavender Hill Mob* represents a very good example of how to make something absolutely funny (students might compare the comic styles of the two films.)

- The opening of the film was inspired by the opening of *The Magnificent Ambersons*.

- *Landslides* has a similar thematic strand to *Road to Nhill* in offering audiences a sense of being in space, a sense that our lives are small in the grand scheme of things and that we are small, fragile and don't know the whole story.

#### Activity

Students might look at some of the above examples (or others on the list) and make a comparative analysis. Additionally, students might look at some of the writings of authors who influenced the filmmakers and discuss in what way you think these authors might have had an impact (examples include the Australian authors Henry Lawson, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Banjo Paterson and Dame Mary Gilmore.) The line at the end

of the film 'Go gently into that good night' is an ironic reference to a quote from Dylan Thomas but it is used in the film in the opposite way to Thomas' intent. Thomas meant to fight death but 'God' in the film is having a joke, saying he is going to get you, you will die in the end.

### THE SCRIPT - An Australian Vision

It was a particular aim of the writer of *Road to Nowhere* to tell an Australian story and several of the actors have commented that the film is distinctively Australian.

- As a class talk about this and then write a short explanation of what makes the film so Australian?

#### Examples :

##### Language

The language used is very Australian, for example 'right as rain,' or 'she'll be right.' The filmmakers acknowledge that their decision to faithfully record an Australian way of speaking will probably mean the film won't be acceptable in the American market but this was important to them, to construct an Australian vision.

- Make a list and discuss the language which you think is particularly Australian.

##### Landscape

The filmmakers have said that the climate and landscape informs who we are. If you put someone in a vast environment with a lot of heat, people don't want to waste energy, they have a different relationship to time and space, and they become laconic. This is one of the things they tried to portray with the characters in the film because they felt that this was a very Australian trait.

- How are the characters portrayed as laconic in the film?
- What are characteristics of the characters which you regard as Australian?

Alison Tilson has said that to be white and Anglo-Saxon is not about achieving big things and building monuments, but rather, in the face of the vast terrain, to survive. She sees the battle with the elements, and surviving them, as a key focus for Australians. This is especially

relevant to the country and is a result of the way in which we have developed historically as a colony which was explored and settled only in the last hundred years.

- Can you think of Australian film representations which have a battle with the elements as a subtext?
- Can you think of any other cultures whose film representations reflect a similar battle against the elements?

#### The Characters

All of the characters have Anglo-Saxon backgrounds and names; Bert, Jim, Jack, Bret, Bob. There aren't any Tamsins or Giovannis.

- Do you think this is representative of country Australia?
- Is it representative of Australia generally?

### THE SCRIPT - The Writing Process

The scriptwriting process for the film involved research, constructing a narrative structure and a workshop of the script.

Research for the script involved going to Pyramid Hill and watching or listening to stories. The writer, Alison Tilson, had in mind an advertisement for beer (XXXX) which she describes as encapsulating the way people talk to each other. It goes something like this: one man says to another 'Have you been drinking XXXX all your life?' and the other man says 'Not yet'. For Tilson this illustrates an Australian way of constantly trading jokes and how little you can say and imply so much. Tilson says that a group of people who know each other well will say 'That'll be right' and they will all know what is meant, but an outsider will be puzzled and wonder but why would it 'be right'? There is a shared history, everyone knows the background story and *Road to Nowhere* captures this.

- Can you think of examples in the film where there is obviously knowledge that the characters know but the audience don't? (For example, in the beginning when the policeman's absence is mentioned but we are not told until much later what happened.)
- This creates interchanges full of subtext. Can you think of a scene and

describe the dialogue and then the subtext.

#### Workshop

Once the script was written, it was workshopped. This allowed the filmmakers a chance to see it come alive with actors at a point when they still had time to think about what is useful and make changes.

- Write dialogues which could have occurred when the characters are fairly quiet and let the scene speak for itself. Produce and present these scenes in your classroom.

### THE SCRIPT

#### Narrative conventions:

This is a story based on the concept of yarn telling in a small country town and how everything is everybody's business. It is a story of a community, rather than (as is a dominant narrative structure) an individual pitting themselves against the society in which they live. The time span for the film is two or three hours over one day and a conclusion some time later. The aim isn't to have a main character achieve, grow, learn, build and conquer the adversary. It is 'a slice of life' and it is not action orientated, it is the exact opposite. The writer, Alison Tilson, says of it :

'If you demand a film that sucks you in and sits you on a ride, takes you away as an audience spectator and thrills and spills you and spits you out at the end, then this film works exactly the opposite of that. But if you can flip into the way that this one works, it is more about active engagement and participation. As an audience you have to work in this one.'

Tilson says of the film that :

It toys with narrative conventions and both subverts and utilises these. There are constant digressions, failures to reach closure where closure would be expected, diversions and asides just at the point one expects dramatic build and interruptions to the suspension of disbelief via the Voice of God and interviews with the characters.

- Can you think of examples where the film fails to reach closure; that is, where



the ends are not all neatly tied up and questions answered?

*Example :*

There are a lot of things you can make your own mind up about in the film and this was an aim of the writer; it reflects the fact that life is not neat and tidy.

Take for example the question : why did Nell die?

There could be a number of answers depending on whom you ask. As an audience, we have a view, like the people in the town, you might have different views from your friend or teacher. The answer might depend on who you are, and how much you know. The writer of the film thinks she died from unrelated causes but that Nell's husband blames the accident. The point is, who will ever know and does anyone really know why she died? In life things happen and we can't always be certain. Nell's death is essential thematically; just as you think you are happily on your way, fate intervenes and the thing you least expect happens. As critic Sandra Hall observes : 'the moment

when everything seems 'as right as rain' is the moment when you have most to worry about'<sup>7</sup>

The writer says that the character God is presented 'as a pompous old windbag who loves the sound of his own voice but who does have the last word and is right about the fact that we will all die.' Listen carefully to the segments where God speaks.

- What do you think the character's role is in the film?

*Discussion*

The writer had to create conflict and in drama this conflict is generally against an adversary. But *Road to Nowhere* is a story without a main protagonist or hero. This is one of the reasons the voice of God was added, otherwise there wouldn't have been an antagonist. God poses the inevitable position - death is going to get everyone in the end. In doing this God or fate becomes the adversary.

- Are there other ways in which the voice of God is important to the film?

*Examples :*

- The film is shot as if we are watching from a distance and we frequently view the action from the sky. The director, Sue Brooks, says of the visual style : 'it rarely tracks into anyone, it usually watches - even when something dramatic happens everyone makes light of it. The whole modus operandi of the film is that everything is not brought to a head but is constantly being rippled out and dissipated.'
- The voice of God provides a framing device, and also an opportunity for a joke with it signalling a false ending (perhaps God is playing with them/us?)
- The idea of a story told from a number of points of view is reinforced by the voice of God.
- Thematically the film is about life, death and fate so someone has to make pronouncements on a grand scale. God becomes the antagonist in a way because he is threatening death and disaster - we can be struck down in our lives.
- God is addressing not just the story but the audience who are also going to die

(therefore taking a position preventing the audience being smug.)

### THE SCRIPT

The screenplay *Road to Nhill* by Alison Tilson is published by Currency Press, RRP \$17.95

The screenplay is available from leading bookshops throughout Australia.

Discussion questions following reading the script :

- Why does Bob go to Jack and Jean's?
- What does the expression 'right as rain' mean?
- Why doesn't Jack want to take Jean to the hospital and why does he instantly change his mind?
- Why doesn't Jean say straight away that she wants to go to hospital?
- Why doesn't Bob say he thinks Jean should go to hospital?
- What is the social function of the cup of tea?
- Is there anything wrong with Jack?
- View this scene again and compare it to the script. How close is it to the finished product and are there any additions which don't appear in the script?

#### Style of the film:

Sue Brooks says that the film is '... not high action drama. It is not Greek tragedy. The film is quite tamped down and sub-textual and the whole visual style goes along with that. It is a very active situation for an audience - you have to work out what is happening... It is quite an odd film, deliberately not based on the standard narrative structure. It is full of digressions and that's the fun of it.'

- What do you think that Brooks means when she says that the film is 'quite tamped down and sub-textual'?
- When you were watching the film, did you have a sense that you needed to work out what was happening?
- How would you describe the genre or style of this film?
- What techniques has the filmmaker used to create effects and atmosphere? You could talk about this in reference to the film as a whole or by looking at individual scenes.

- What impact does the film have on you as you watch it?
- What kinds of audiences would appreciate this film?
- What can you learn about country and small community life from a study of *Road to Nhill*?
- Write your own synopsis of what happens in the film.
- Whose point of view is being presented in the film?
- Describe the film's visual style? For example: are there close-ups used for a particular effect, or wide shots, do certain characters dominate, is the camera still or does it move, etc.?
- Watch segments closely more than once and then write close studies of each extract. In these you could comment on the action in the section, characters, the settings chosen, themes, film techniques, camerawork, music, and editing.
- Devise further possible scenes in the film. Write them and then develop performances. You will need to develop the script, scenes, setting, roles of actors, and thoughts about how you are going to shoot the film. Some examples could include: Margot being chatted up by Brian after church. Ted being concerned that he did the wrong thing putting his wife in the truck. What happens when Bret catches up with his wife when she drives off near the end of the film? etc.
- Listen to the music which is in the background and as a feature in particular scenes. What atmosphere do the different scores create? How would you describe the music that has been composed by Elizabeth Drake?

For further information :  
Road to Nhill on the Web  
To see information on cast, crew, synopsis, stills and audio clips see :  
[www.road-to-nhill.com](http://www.road-to-nhill.com)

#### Finally:

Write a review of *Road to Nhill* which would be appropriate for a daily newspaper film section.

Read out the reviews which have been written by several members of your class and discuss the different reactions they have to the film.

A special educational kit on *Road to Nhill* is available from Ronin Films, P.O. Box 1005, Civic Square, A.C.T 2608. Phone (02) 6248 0851. Fax (02) 6249 1640 email: [admin@roninfilms.com.au](mailto:admin@roninfilms.com.au)

The pack includes the published screenplay and a VHS videotape containing the feature (in widescreen format), the theatrical trailer and a 17 minute documentary about the making of *Road to Nhill*.

<sup>1</sup> The AFC and The Film Finance Corporation are national organisations and there are funding organisations in each state; Film Victoria (Cinemedia), Film Queensland, NSW Film & Television Office, Screenwest, South Australian Film Corporation, and through Arts Tasmania.

<sup>2</sup> Stratton, D., *Road to Nhill*, *Variety*, August 18-24, 1997, p.35.

<sup>3</sup> Roach, V., 'Patchy Road is load of laughs', *Daily Telegraph*, November 20, 1997, p.43.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, S., 'Land of the long pregnant pause', *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 20, 1997, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Martin, A., 'The Road to nowhere', *The Age*, November 13, 1997, p.35.

<sup>6</sup> Press Kit for the film

<sup>7</sup> Hall, S., 'Land of the long pregnant pause', *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 20, 1997, p. 18.



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