

**TSSM**<sup>TM</sup>  
Creating VCE Success

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES  
**“Bypass: the story of a road”**

Text guide by: Hannah Young

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SAMPLE

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NOTE: The page numbers in this text guide refer to the following copy of the book:  
 McGirr, M. 2007 *Bypass: The story of a road*, Picador, Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Ltd, Sydney

## AUTHOR NOTES

Michael McGirr, a contemporary Australian writer, was born in 1961 in Sydney. He says that he was 'raised in Sydney but grew up in Melbourne' and lived in between the two with his wife and young children whilst writing *Bypass: The story of a road*.

Prior to becoming an author, McGirr was a Jesuit for twenty years and a Catholic priest for seven. He comments that he is not quite sure what drew him to the priesthood initially, but that it was an 'impulsive thing' to join straight out of school shortly, after his father passed away. He says that leaving the priesthood was like 'getting divorced, sacked and evicted all on the same day', and this change led him to travel the Hume Highway by bike on a quest to understand the changes in his own life.

McGirr was a founding staff member of the *Eureka Street*, journal and has been a regular newspaper columnist and contributor for papers such as the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Canberra Times* and *The Age*. Additionally, he was a frequent presenter on ABC radio. Whilst still a priest, he worked on Melbourne-based Jesuit Publications and edited the *Australian Catholic* magazine. From 2001-2005, he was the fiction editor of the journal *Meanjin* and in 2005 he was the H.C Coombs Creative Arts Fellow at the Australian National University. Far from abandoning the Catholic Church altogether, in January 2007, McGirr moved to Melbourne to take up a position as Head of Faith and Mission at St Kevin's College, a private boy's school.

McGirr believed that he had to follow his own inner voice, and that for his own well being he needed to be with somebody. That 'somebody' is Jenny, the narrator's cycling companion and ultimately his wife and mother of his three children.

He has written two other full length pieces, *The Lost Art of Sleep* and *Things You Get For Free*.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It is difficult to define just which part of the 'historical context' this text should be focusing upon. McGirr, as a contemporary Australian writer, has essentially produced a memoir chronicling his own quest for self realisation and discovery. He has woven the stories of the 5000 trucks thundering between Melbourne and Sydney every day, with the historical figures associated with the highway and also the stories of the everyday people who live and work on the towns often bypassed by the country's main street.

The Hume Highway itself, began in 1824 when Hamilton Hume and William Hilton Hovell left the town of Gunning (near Canberra) to head south to Port Phillip (now Melbourne), and finally arrived in 1826, after a long and tumultuous journey, made all the more trying as the two men did not get along. Obviously, since then, the Hume, which has been, and is variously known as, 'The Great South Road', the 'North-Eastern Highway', 'Sydney Road', 'Melbourne Road' and everything in between, has undergone significant changes. Parts of it remain the 'Old Hume Highway' and parts of it are now known as the 'Hume Freeway', sometimes it is just called 'the road'. McGirr challenges those of us who frequently use the road, to question whether we have actually thought about the history and in a way the 'life' of the road that gets us where we need to go.

There are several sites along the Hume Highway which are remarkable for their historical significance including the 'Dog on the Tuckerbox' at Gundagai, and the Old Goulburn River Bridge near Seymour, which has been listed by Heritage Victoria for its historic, scientific (technological) and aesthetic significance to the state of Victoria.

McGirr does not choose to focus on only the positive aspects of the road, but rather accurately creates a history of the highs and lows of humanity by including the stories of a serial killer, of influential writer Henry Handel Richardson (Ethel Florence), and of the everyday heroes such as Bruce and Anne McGregor for their conservation work on the Merri Creek just outside of Melbourne. Other historical figures to make an appearance are William Buckley, Jane Franklin, Henry Ford, Ned Kelly and Nick Cave, to name but a few. Then, of course, there is the story of the unlikely athlete, Cliff Young, spaced intermittently throughout the text, being a name and a story that popular culture will not forget.

Throughout the text, there are several mentions of the memorials scattered along the length of the road. Memorials to lives lost in accidents as well as at least 50 war memorials to those soldiers who paid the ultimate sacrifice for their country and, in turn, became heroes of their country towns.

McGirr cleverly intertwines the past and the present of the road to suggest that the road is a symbol of life. The inclusion of 'real life' characters provides the readers with a chance to identify with the story on a personal level, and McGirr's writing style helps us to recognise that there is no 'now' without a past.