



Simply Specky

Felice Arena and Garry Lyon have bounced the ball with another Specky Magee title, writes CHRISTOPHER BANTICK

Specky Magee and the Spirit of the Game kicks off Specky's sixth season.

Growing readership, particularly with boys, for the Specky books is partly due to the idea of a series maintaining reader interest. But it is more than this. These books are a good action read. And for boys, action is what counts.

At least this is the opinion of the British Education Secretary, Alan Johnson. He suggested in March this year that for school libraries to encourage boys to read, they needed "Not just Jane Austen but a necessary dose of Anthony Horowitz as well."

The point Johnson was making is that boys like action. It follows then that books which have action in them are likely to be popular. It has to be said, Jane Austen, regardless of her literary virtues, is not action packed.

For this reason, boys get the double whammy of action and football. Add to this the vicarious sense that Specky is just like them, or at least in their dreams, and the books are a sure fire winner. But there is another aspect as well.

The style of the Specky books is both welcoming and easy to read. Boys do not have to feel anxious about finding words that will trip them up and divert their concentration from the story. More than this, the book is written in the language of the schoolyard and football field. Specky speaks as boys do.

While the virtues of the Specky books are many, this book in particular raises some important questions. The focus is on country football and whether the Rivergum Red Fins will survive. Besides the drama associated with Specky and the do-or-die game for the Red Fins, the emphasis is on whether the game of football is about more than scoring goals. It is left to Specky to discover this.

The potential the Specky books have for extended discussion is considerable. With *Specky Magee and the Spirit of the Game*, this is clearly relevant as player behaviour is in the news.

This is not just over drug abuse or violent behaviour, but whether football has lost sight of the individuals who play it. Then there is the matter of the media and whether this is intrusive on the private lives of footballers.

The spirit of the game is what football offers people who may not, like Specky, be a star. Part of this is the way football brings people together and enables them to participate in a collective activity on and off the field. Given that rivalry

is often intense, it is what defines the spirit of the game that endures.

While Specky is a role model, this is found in more than his football ability. It is through the game he loves that he discovers and learns much about life. This is the importance of tradition, the importance of supporting your mates and why it is that football can be a barometer of a town's sense of wellbeing.

There is ample scope in Arena's and Lyon's writing for both boys and girls to evaluate what they see as important and whether they would choose to act as Specky does. One thing is clear: the situations Specky finds himself in are far greater than running onto the field.

Football is people. They are its spirit. The message *Specky Magee and the Spirit of the Game* has is how football can offer deep personal rewards. Heroes do not always have to win either.

Books to win

Students have a chance to win one of 10 copies of *Specky Magee and the Spirit of the Game*, by Felice Arena and Garry Lyon, thanks to publisher Puffin. Simply write on the back of an envelope your name, age, school, home postal address and send to: Specky Magee Book Competition, Mercury NIE, GPO Box 334, Hobart TAS 7001. Entries close on May 18 and will be named in Learning on May 22.



SPECTACULAR: Specky Magee authors Felice Arena and Garry Lyon at the MCG with some of their young fans