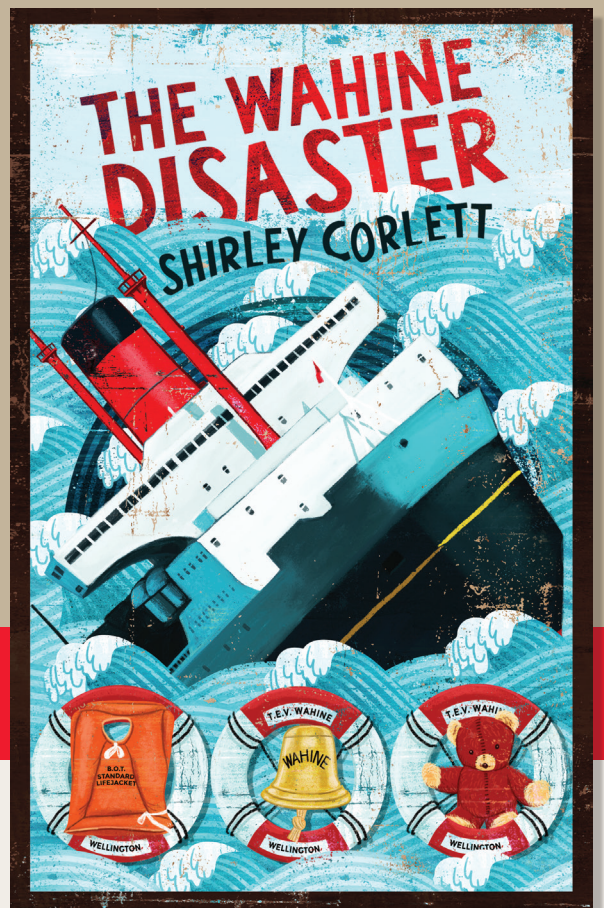


# The Wahine Disaster

By Shirley Corlett

- Reading • Writing • Social Studies •
- Thinking Skills • Lexile 570



## Synopsis

Twelve-year old Debbie is a typical New Zealand pre-teen, worrying about friendships, her parents arguing, and whether she's got pimples. She goes to school, reads lots of books, and hangs out with her friend Melanie. Debbie's life changes when she is diagnosed with glandular fever; she has to stay in bed to recover. She reads her great-great-great-grandfather's (Grandfather James) diary of his journey from England to New Zealand. But something weird happens; sometimes she feels like she is transported on board the emigration ship and her grandfather is trying to tell her something. When she travels to Christchurch for a stay with her cousins, she meets a new friend; someone who likes her for who she is, not for what she has got. Debbie is excited that Bronwyn will be moving to Wellington and going to be living near her.

They all board the same ship, the *Wahine*, for the overnight trip to Wellington. Unfortunately, two disastrous weather bombs merge and the *Wahine* is shipwrecked on the reef. Debbie loses her older cousin Val and is thrown into a lifeboat and told to abandon ship. When the lifeboat is tipped over, Debbie holds on until she feels numb inside and is about to give up. But her Grandfather James visits her and tells her to hold on. Soon she is rescued and ends up in the hospital where her parents find her. She experiences flashbacks for a while afterwards, and her cousin – who has miraculously survived – is snubbing her. One day they're home alone and clutch onto each other and sob. It releases the fears and tension they'd been holding onto. Val shares that she felt she had failed Debbie, and recounts what happened to her when she fell into the sea. Together they heal and carry on with their lives.

## About the Author

Shirley Corlett is from Masterton. She based the grandfather's diary in the novel on the journal of JR Motherwell (who was a doctor on board the *Birman*, a New Zealand settler ship). Shirley's forebears Samuel and Eliza Crowther and their baby girl, Jane, were on the voyage that brought emigrants from England to New Zealand in 1841. The journal was deciphered by Shirley's family. Shirley researched a wide range of actual accounts reported by the *Wahine* passengers. The author has also written fantasy tales: *The Stolen* and *The Weather-Makers*. Other books include *Addie Accident*, *Through Thick and Thin*, *You've Got Guts*, *Kenny Melrose*, and *Fire in the Sky: The Diary of James Collier, Tarawera 1886*.



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# Writing Style

*The Wahine Disaster* is a rejacketed edition of this popular book in the successful My New Zealand Story series, bringing history alive with dramatic imagined accounts of life during a particular time or event. In this case, the author has interwoven the imaginary present-day (1960s) diary of a young girl on the *Wahine* along with real the 1841 diary of a doctor on board the *Birman* coming to New Zealand. *The Wahine Disaster* focuses on everyday life in New Zealand in the 1960s, culminating in the sinking of the inter-island ferry *Wahine* along with flashbacks to the doctor's experience on the barque. The back of the book includes useful historical notes and photographs from the time. The story is set in Wellington and on two ships; the *Birman* barque and the *Wahine* ferry. The book is split into three parts. Part one of the story leads up to the *Wahine* tragedy, part two is when she is home after the shipwreck and recounting what happened, and part three is her life getting back to normal again.

The story is told from the main character 12-year-old Debbie's point of view. She talks directly to her diary (called Julie), clearly articulating her thoughts and feelings in the diary entries in past tense. Her language reflects the times with the main character using slang such as 'groovy', 'fab' and 'cool'. She's a typical teenage character worrying about friendships, what she and others look like and what other people think of her. Other teenagers can relate to her parent issues, growing up, and for those who have been through a traumatic event – mixed-up feelings and getting through it. The characters in the novel are fictional, but most of the events described are factual. *The Wahine Disaster* has been written for the 10- to 13-year-old age group. Themes include family, friendships, tragedy, dealing with change and recovering from a disaster.

## Shared Learning and Discussion Points

The novel has been divided up into four parts as follows: pp: 7-10 & 134-146; 11-76; 79-106; 109-133.

During the shared sessions, encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of characters and events. Have them make predictions and inferences and relate these to their own experiences. Also encourage students to identify themes and explain how they are developed in the novel. Read the passages aloud and students can read alongside or by themselves.

### ASK YOUR STUDENTS:

Look at the cover and read the blurb.

- When and where is this story set? How can you tell?
- Who is the main character in the story?
- What do you think this story is about? Why do you think that?
- The story is told in diary format. What can you expect from a novel written like this?
- What do you already know about the *Wahine* tragedy?

### Comprehension questions pp. 7-10, 134-146

- Why do you think the author has given us information about the *Birman* and its passengers at the beginning of the book?
- What was the weather like on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 1968?
- Why did the weather forecasters get their predictions wrong?
- What made the weather worse on that day?
- How would you describe the *Wahine*?
- What does the author mean by 'The *Wahine* would not answer her helm'?
- How much did the winds increase from the first forecast to the actual forecast?
- What happened to the ferry during the storm?
- How many people died in the tragedy?
- How were the rest of the people saved during the tragedy?

### Comprehension pp. 11-76

- What do the first two pages say about the protagonist (Debbie)? What have you learned about her?
- What have you learned about Debbie's parents in this chapter?
- What could you say about Melanie's character?
- Why do you think Debbie's mother is unhappy in their new house?
- Why is Debbie's father amused when she tells them they are acting in a juvenile manner?
- Why does Debbie call the boys next door the 'Blabbermouth Brothers' and their mother 'Mrs Don't-you-think'? What does that imply about what she thinks of the family?
- What do you think is the shivery feeling and the thing she saw out of the corner of her eye?
- Debbie talks about being tired, feeling sick and emotional – what do you think is wrong with her?
- Whose diary is Debbie given and why is it so significant?



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- What does Debbie's mother mean when she says, '... being bright can be a burden as well as a gift'?
- Describe the quarters on board the barque.
- How long did it take to sail from England to New Zealand in the 1800s?
- Why does Debbie enjoy staying at her cousin's place?
- What do you think someone does when they have a 'fit of hysterics'?
- Why do some of these people behave badly and what causes this in some cases?
- What true significant historical event has occurred during the story?
- Why do you think Debbie is having dreams?
- What does Debbie's mother want to do and why would it upset Debbie's father? What does this say about these times? Have we changed much?
- Why did Debbie hit her next-door-neighbour on the head with a piece of driftwood? What would you have done in the same circumstances?
- What has Debbie kept hidden in her bedroom and what do you think the consequences will be when her parents find out?
- What have the parents realised about their argument and what does it say about their relationship?
- What do Debbie's blood test results reveal and how will it affect her?
- What do you think Grandfather James is trying to tell Debbie?
- What April Fools joke did Debbie play on her dad and how did he take it? What April Fools jokes have you played on your family?
- Where is Debbie going to for a week and why is she so excited to go?
- What did Debbie find in Christchurch? Why do you think this person is different to her other friend?
- What game did Debbie and the cousins do that enabled all the children to play?
- What causes seasickness and how does it affect the two girls?

### Comprehension pp. 79-106

- Why do you think the author has skipped to after the shipwreck?
- How did the girls know something was really wrong?
- What did the intercom tell the passengers to do? How did that make the girls feel?
- Why did the first rescue attempt for the ship not work?
- How has the author/narrator drawn us into the scene on the boat? What senses does she use?
- Why did Debbie go below decks and why was it a dangerous thing to do?
- What happens when a boat 'lists' and what does it say about what is happening to the boat?
- What changed on the boat that forced the captain to tell the passengers to abandon ship?
- What happened to Val? Do you think she will survive?
- How did Debbie end up in a lifeboat?
- How did their lifeboat overturn?
- What significant thing happens to Debbie that helps her survive the ordeal?
- Why was Debbie 'beyond emotion'?
- How did the medical staff help her recover?
- What miracle happened and how did you feel when you read that line? (Val surviving)

### Comprehension pp. 109-133

- What damage did the storm cause in Wellington?
- How has the disaster affected Val? Why do you think she is acting like that?
- What does a disaster like that make a person realise after experiencing it?
- How did Bronwyn's family fare through the tragedy?
- How did Debbie's parents react when she told them about her great-great-great-grandfather helping her? Why do you think they reacted like that?
- Why do you think Debbie is having flashbacks?
- What happens to Val and Debbie that helps them move on from the ordeal?
- How did Val survive being thrown into the water?
- Why did Val feel she was responsible for Debbie and how did it affect her emotions afterwards?
- What was Henry experiencing after he knocked his head on the tree? Why was it important he get to the doctors quickly?
- How did Bronwyn survive the disaster?
- Why did Debbie's father bring Mr Brunton to their house?
- How did Debbie's grandmother react to the story about her grandfather saving her?
- Why did Debbie think what Bronwyn said was momentous?
- What significant thing did Debbie discover when she read her 'grandfather's' life story?
- Why has the author ended the story on that note?



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# Activities

## ACTIVITY 1: RESEARCH

Find out more about the *Wahine* disaster. Write down 3-5 questions you would like answered about the tragedy. Then research non-fiction books and internet resources to find the answers. Write down where you got the information from and the page numbers. Afterwards summarise the information in your own words: with a main idea and 3-4 supporting ideas. Use a chart to display your information.

## ACTIVITY 2: READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Write a newspaper article about the tragedy reporting Debbie's survival. The structure of the newspaper article will be: Headline; Lead sentence; Introduction; Opening quotation; Main body; Closing quotation; Conclusion.

In the lead sentence hook your reader in. In the introduction paragraph reveal who, what, where and when. Give facts and figures (if appropriate). Include a quotation (perhaps from Debbie's diary). In the main body of the article, reveal how and why the tragedy occurred. Then include another quotation that sums up the article in a few words. End the article with a memorable sentence. Perhaps with a quote or a link to more information about the disaster.

## ACTIVITY 3: REVIEW IT!

Write a review for the book. Include a summary of *The Wahine Disaster*. Explain the importance of the two diaries and the ship settings. Describe the main character and other characters. Include information about the main themes and ideas presented in the story. Finally, give your opinion about the book.

Summarise the above and write it on a bookmark and insert it into the book so that the next person who picks it up can see your comments.

## ACTIVITY 4: BOOK TRAILER TIME!

Design a book trailer for the book. Use a software package like 'Animoto', using one of their free templates. Storyboard what you want to say in the book trailer, collect photos, illustrations and videos (if needed), and then insert it into the Animoto template you have chosen. Show it to the class. See if the school library or website would like to include it on their site.

## ACTIVITY 5: TIMELINE THE EVENTS

Ask the students what they thought were the most significant events in the story. Record them on the board. If you think any have been missed, ask, 'What about when Debbie. . ., do you consider that a turning point in the story?'

Students then select important events throughout the story and put them on a timeline. Type it online using an app like SmartDraw 2019 or a similar app.

## ACTIVITY 6: THINKING SQUARED!

What if Debbie's Grandfather James hadn't been there to help her while she was in the water. Brainstorm all the things she could have done to help herself. Then pick one of them and rewrite that part of the story with that change. Students then edit their story, remembering to supercharge their verbs, be precise with their nouns, and use different styles of text: narration, dialogue, action, thoughts, description. Then read it aloud to a partner and receive their positive and constructive feedback before making final changes.



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