

# **My Story: Chinatown Girl The Diary of Silvey Chan, Auckland, 1942**

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## **Synopsis**

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Silvey Chan is 12 years old. She lives in Greys Avenue, Auckland, above her parent's shop. She lives with her parents, her grandfather, her two brothers and two sisters. She attends Beresford Street School as well as Chinese School. She is good friends with Judy Brown and enjoys hanging out with her (when she has time!).

Silvey lives in a close knit Chinese Community which struggles to maintain its own culture and traditions during the hard war years in New Zealand. For a school project Silvey learns about her history from her mother and grandfather. They regale her with stories of emigrating to New Zealand from China, the poverty of village life, arranged marriages and the prejudices that many Chinese face while trying to forge a new life in New Zealand.

Silvey is growing up and in her diary she writes about Sunny, an annoying boy she meets who has a crush on her. She also befriends Tom Lee, Wayne Fong and Harry Young, young Chinese-American soldiers who arrive in New Zealand on their way to the battlefield. Through Silvey's diary entries we learn about the difficulties of growing up in war time New Zealand, particularly if you belong to a different culture.

## **Text Type**

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*Chinatown Girl* is written in diary form and covers the year of 1942. The novel will appeal particularly to girls as the author of the diary, Silvey, is a young adolescent sharing her thoughts and feelings about growing up during a difficult era. Through Silvey's diary entries we learn not only about Silvey's present day life, but also the fascinating details of her family's life in China and the hardship that many Chinese faced when forging a new life in New Zealand. Students will be interested in the attitudes of New Zealanders to the new emigrants during this time and the government's "anti-Chinese" legislation designed to limit emigration.

Silvey's family faces many hardships because of the war. Rationing was in force and resources were scarce. Despite this, Silvey's family still tries hard to retain their unique festivals and traditions. Throughout the story 'family' is shown to be of the utmost importance in Chinese culture. Themes include the

hardships of war, the importance of retaining culture and language, racial prejudice and growing up.

## Sharing the Novel

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***The novel has been divided up as follows: Historical Note and photographs (pp. 189-206) and pp. 9-22, pp. 23-90, pp. 91-133 and pp. 134-186.***

It would be a good idea to have students conduct some library research into World War II and New Zealand's involvement in the war so that they understand the context of the story. Some prior knowledge of Chinese emigration into New Zealand during this time would also be helpful.

During the shared sessions encourage students to use the glossary provided at the beginning of the novel to clarify their understanding of Chinese words included. Have them compare their lives with Silvey's in terms of leisure activities, school, friends, family and culture. Students should be able to identify the impact that the war has on Silvey's family and other people in New Zealand. Draw students' attention to government policies regarding the Chinese during this time and the prejudice that emigrants faced. It would be useful for students to have a discussion regarding how these attitudes have changed and how they compare to today.

## Introduction

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***Students read the Historical Note and look at the photographs on pages 189-206.***

- What is a "Chinatown"? Why did these develop?
- Why was life difficult for early Chinese emigrants?
- Why did many Chinese want to travel overseas?
- Why did so many Chinese end up settling in New Zealand?
- What laws were passed by the government to curb Chinese immigration? Do you consider these laws to be prejudiced? Explain your answer.
- How many Chinese did the government give temporary residence to between 1939 and 1941? Who convinced the government to allow these people to stay after the war?
- When were the laws regarding Chinese abolished?
- What caused public attitude towards Chinese to improve?
- How many Chinese were recorded as living in New Zealand in the 2001 census? How is life different for Chinese living in New Zealand today?
- What do you expect from a novel set out in diary form? Who does the diary belong to? When is the story set?

**Teacher reads pp. 9-22 aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.**

## **Comprehension pp. 9-22**

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- How old is Silvey? Where does she live? Who does she live with?
- What is Silvey's Chinese name? What does it mean?
- Who is Judy Brown?
- Why does Silvey's school have to close down? Where will she go to school from now on?
- When does Silvey attend Chinese school? What does she like about Chinese school? What doesn't she like?
- What is salt fish? How is it prepared? Why is fish scarce?
- Why does Silvey sometimes get teased at school? How does Judy stick up for her?
- Why is war all anyone talks about?
- What is Chinese writing called?

### **Discussion**

- What do we know about Silvey so far? In what ways is her life different to yours?
- Many things that we take for granted today were not around in 1942. What modern convenience or appliance would you miss the most and why?
- In what ways do you think the war has affected the everyday lives of people left behind in New Zealand?

**Students read pp. 23-90 independently before the next shared session.**

## **Comprehension pp. 23-90**

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- What is ergot? Why are school children encouraged to collect it?
- Who is Mrs Leong? Why does Silvey consider herself lucky not to be one of her children?
- Who kills the family's chickens? How does she do it? Why does she think that it is important for Silvey to watch?
- Who is Sunny? Where does he live? How does Silvey react when he asks her out?
- Where does Sunny have to go to school? Why is Silvey unsure about writing to him?
- Describe Silvey's new school. What assignment is she given for History?
- Where was Silvey's mum born? What about her dad?
- What language does the family speak at home?
- Why do the children need to be indoors by 6 pm?
- Why does Silvey's Ma encourage her to write to Sunny?
- What is "boarding house" a cover up name for?



- What is Silvey's part of Greys Avenue called?
- What is directly opposite Silvey's family's shop?
- What did Chinese emigrants need to pay in order to be able to come to New Zealand? Why was Ba able to come to New Zealand without paying any money?
- What encouraged Silvey's dad to learn English so quickly?
- How did Greys Avenue become Chinatown?
- Why did Ah Ye go overseas initially? What is Gum Sarn?
- Why did so many New Zealanders resent the Chinese emigrants? What are some of the names they called them?
- What did Ah Yeh do for a job when he realised that most of the gold had gone?
- Why couldn't Ah Yeh bring his wife to New Zealand?
- Why does Silvey feel sorry for Ah Yeh and Ah Ngin?
- Who is Nam Bak? How did he get into trouble on the bus to Christchurch?
- What document does Nam Bak show Silvey? Why does he feel angry about how he was treated?
- Describe Silvey's "dream house".
- What does Mai share with Silvey about the boarding houses?
- How do Silvey and her family celebrate Chinese New Year?
- What news does Hor Nam Bak share about Singapore? Why are Silvey and her family so concerned about this news?
- Summarise the story that Silvey's Ma told her about her background.
- What is contained in the letter that Silvey's parents receive from her school?
- What awful event occurs on 20<sup>th</sup> February?
- What happens during an air-raid drill?
- What treats do the children receive at the Chinese New Year picnic?

### Discussion

- What aspects of Chinese culture have been discussed so far in Silvey's diary? Why is it so important for people living in a new country to try and retain their culture and language?
- Silvey's dad left China at the age of 10, leaving behind his mother, brothers and sisters. Why do you think the family made the decision that he should go? How would you feel if you were in his position?
- Compare and contrast Silvey's life and living conditions with your own.

***Students read pp. 91-133 independently before the next shared session.***

### Comprehension pp. 91-133

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- What is Lao See's secret?
- Why were there fewer people than usual on Queen Street on the day of the air-raid?
- Why is Silvey so nervous when she hears the plane?
- Why does everyone rush to the shops to buy sweets?



- What does Miss Rudkin tell the class about the poll tax? How do her comments make Silvey feel?
- What is Ching Ming? What do the family do during this time?
- Why does Silvey like Yen Gor so much?
- Who is Huk Sarn? What does Yen Gor tell Silvey about him?
- Why do Dao Gor and Silvey decide to stay up late and sneak out of the house? What do they hear?
- What documentation does Ba take with him to register for ration books?
- How does Mr Sing-Song get lost? How does Ah Yeh react to his disappearance?
- How do the Chan children know when their parents are happy with their reports?
- What happens to allow Yee Bak to send for his wife and children?
- What does Silvey find out about Sunny and his family when he comes for dinner?
- What news does Yee Bak receive that is both happy and sad?
- What is the Battle of the Coral Sea?
- How does Yee Bak-Mu react when she sees where the Chan's live? What can you ascertain about village conditions from her comments?
- What does Ma tell Silvey about Yee Bak-Mu? Why was her journey to New Zealand so dangerous?
- What do the Yee boys change their names to?
- What does Sunny paint Dia Gor a picture of?
- What does the headline in paper "It can happen here!" refer to?
- Why is Silvey so concerned when she learns that rice is to be rationed?
- What English name does Betty give her brother?
- Why isn't there much information available about the arrival of the American troops? How does Auckland celebrate their arrival?
- Who is Mar Hoy Bak? What is wrong with him? Why won't he seek treatment?
- How did Mar Hoy Bak die? How does Silvey react to the news? What do Silvey's family prepare to hand out at his funeral? What is the significance of these?

### Discussion

- What is rationing? Why do you think it was in force during the war? How is Silvey's family affected? What other resources are scarce?
- Do you agree with Miss Rudkin about the poll tax being racist? Why/why not? Can you think of other examples of government policies that discriminate against particular races? Your examples could be from New Zealand or overseas. Have you ever been a victim of racism? How did it make you feel?
- Do you believe in ghosts? Why/why not? Have you ever had an experience that might have involved a ghost or spirit? Describe it. Why do you think ghost stories are so popular?
- How does Silvey feel about Sunny? Why do you think she feels this way? What plans does Silvey have for her future?

**Students read pp. 134-186 independently before the next shared session.**

## **Comprehension pp. 134-186**

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- Describe Silvey's fishing expedition with Sunny.
- Who does Silvey baby-sit? What happens while Silvey is there? How does Silvey choose to deal with the situation? What does this reveal to us about her character?
- What important lesson does the burglary teach Mr and Mrs Chong?
- How does Silvey identify the man who broke in?
- What is the poetic language term given to words that all start with the same letter?
- Why is Silvey so excited when she is allowed to stay over at Judy's house on Saturday night? Describe how the pair celebrate their birthdays.
- Describe Judy's house. What aspects of it surprise Silvey?
- Who was Confucius? Why is he such an important figure to the Chinese?
- Summarise the contents of the article that appeared in the Herald. How does Ba react when he reads the article?
- How do Silvey and her family celebrate Chinese National Day?
- What is happening in China that makes Silvey feel grateful that she lives in New Zealand?
- What roles do Tom, Wayne and Harry have in the army?
- What do Tom and Wayne give Dai Gor, Silvey and Judy at the Victoria Park camp? Why are these things such a treat? What observations do the kids make about the camp during their visit there?
- Why are Tom and Wayne so impressed with Ma's cooking? How does Tom entertain his hosts after dinner?
- What happened to Sunny's dad? How is the accident going to change Sunny's life?
- What does Silvey want to do when she leaves school? What advice does Tom give her?
- What surprising remark does Sunny make when he says goodbye to Silvey? How does Silvey react to his comment?
- Why aren't Tom, Harry and Wayne going to be able to visit the Chan's anymore?
- How does Silvey feel when she has to farewell her new friends? What Christmas presents do the Americans leave for the family?

### **Discussion**

- What potential danger could Silvey get herself in by identifying the burglar? How does the experience of the break-in affect Silvey? Have you ever had a similar experience? If so, describe what happened.



- Attitudes of citizens and the Government of New Zealand towards Chinese gradually changed during the war years. Find examples in the novel that help illustrate these changes.
- Why do you think the Chan family embraced the young American soldiers so whole-heartedly? What do you think their hospitality and friendship meant to the visitors? How does their departure help bring home the realities of war to Silvey?
- What lessons do you think Silvey has learned during the year that she kept her diary?

## Activities

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**Research** – Choose an aspect of WWII mentioned in the book and conduct a research assignment about it. Ideas include: the fall of Singapore, the Battle of the Coral Sea, rationing and Australia's involvement in the war. Formulate 3 open-ended questions to focus your research. Come up with possible sources of information and record the process that you go through in a log. Present your information as an essay, on a poster or in an oral presentation.

**Speech** – Write a speech about the prejudices faced by many Chinese emigrants in New Zealand. Research your topic and include information about different Government policies that discriminated against Chinese. Explain why you think these attitudes existed and how they gradually changed. Include your personal opinion. Use a range of delivery techniques when you present your speech.

**Poster** – Based on the details provided in the novel and your own research design a poster that provides citizens with instructions about what to do during an air-raid.

**Theme** – Choose an important idea or theme developed in the novel. Design a collage that uses images, words and symbols to portray this theme.

**Issues** – Did anything in the story make you change your mind about something? If you did, what was it in the story that caused it and why?

**Character** – Complete a character description for Silvey Chan. Include information about her qualities and characteristics and any difficulties that she had to overcome.

**Play** – Choose an exciting event that occurs in the story and write a script for it. Include a list of characters and stage directions. Practise your play and present it to the class.

**Letter** – Write a letter to the author explaining why you enjoyed reading her book and what it taught you.

**Contrasts** – Draw 2 columns on a piece of A4 paper. Label one side 1942 and the other present day. Include in the first list things that Silvey had and activities that she did in 1942, then compare them with the things you have and do today.