

# The Shearwater Bell

Author: Margaret Beames

## Synopsis

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Rona's father is in London when he has a serious traffic accident. He is in a coma and Rona's mum has to travel over there immediately. Rona has to go and stay with her Nan at Warren's Bay, a prospect that she is not looking forward to. Rona has never met her Nan. Living with a stranger in the middle of nowhere for an indefinite period of time is not her idea of fun.

However, she has no choice so she decides to make the best of the situation. She doesn't want to trouble her Nan so she tries to keep herself busy by doing chores and exploring the property. Then she meets Wiri, her neighbour. Wiri has just discovered an old diary which belonged to Jonathan Trevarren, the sole survivor of a shipwreck. Wiri and Rona are fascinated by the diary and spend a few days reading it. Of particular interest to them is the mention of the hidden treasure and the Shearwater Bell, an ominous sound that Rona has heard at night.

According to local legend, when the bell tolls; it means that someone is going to die. This obviously worries Rona as her father lies in a hospital bed and his chances of survival are still unknown.

Wiri and Rona decide to hunt for the hidden treasure with disastrous consequences. Perhaps the bell isn't tolling for her father after all...

## Text Type

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Written by New Zealand author Margaret Beames, *The Shearwater Bell* is a fascinating novel full of adventure and mystery. Fast-paced and full of interesting diary extracts *The Shearwater Bell* holds broad appeal for both boys and girls. The story is told in 3<sup>rd</sup> person point of view but the reader is given insights into Rona's thoughts and feelings about her situation. We learn how she feels like her Nan doesn't really care about her because she doesn't spend much time with her and doesn't seem to care what she does. As the story develops it becomes clear that Nan is afraid of making the same mistake twice; she was very strict on Rona's mother and feels like she was responsible for driving her away. She doesn't want the same thing to happen with her granddaughter. When Rona is missing Nan reveals her feelings for her granddaughter and it is clear that the two will develop a closer relationship after this incident.

Another storyline develops simultaneously as the story contained within the diary that Wiri discovers unravels. The promise of hidden treasure and a mysterious bell are too much for Rona and Wiri to resist, and they unwittingly risk their own lives by pursuing their objective. During their ordeal, Rona displays bravery and loyalty by refusing to leave Wiri's side and assisting in his rescue.

Themes in the novel include family relationships, the importance of history and the role that it plays in shaping the present, superstitions, friendship and adventure.

## Sharing the Novel

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The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapter 1 (pp. 5- 20), Chapters 2- 7 (pp. 21- 96) and Chapters 8- 12 (pp. 97- 160).

During the shared session encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas raised in the novel. Have them make inferences and predict what is going to happen next in the story. Wherever possible, have students relate Rona's adventures to their own experiences and broader knowledge. Students should analyse the main character and look at her actions, motivations and how she develops and changes as the story progresses. They should be able to identify important themes and ideas raised in the story - especially the importance of history and family.

## Introducing the Novel

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Have students study the front cover of the novel and read the blurb.

- Why do you think the novel is called *The Shearwater Bell*?
- What kind of ship is pictured on the front cover of the novel? How old does this ship look?
- Describe the picture on the back page of the novel. Why do you think this is important?
- Who are the main characters in the novel?
- What is wrong with Rona's father?
- Why is the Shearwater bell called the "ghost bell"?
- What do you think happens to Wiri and Rona when they look for the source of the bell?

**Teacher reads Chapter 1 (pp. 5- 20) aloud. Students follow along in their books.**

### **Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 5- 20)**

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- Why is Rona's life changed so dramatically by one phone call?
- Why can't she accompany her mother to England?
- Where does Nan live? Why did Rona's mum have a falling out with her?
- Who is Wiri?
- Who was Varren's Bay named after?
- Describe Nan's house. Where is Nan when Rona and her mum first see her? What does she say that helps put Rona's mum at ease?
- Which room does Nan put Rona into? Why does Rona like it so much?
- Why does Rona find it so hard to sleep the first night at her Nan's?
- Why strange noise does Rona hear as she is lying in bed? How does Nan respond when she asks her about it?

#### **Discussion**

- What do we learn about Rona and her family in the first Chapter?
- Describe Rona's Nan. What is it like for Rona living with her?
- What do you think is making the strange noise that Rona heard?
- Make a prediction about what will happen next in the story.

**Students read Chapters 2- 7 (pp. 21- 96) independently before the next shared session.**

### **Comprehension Chapters 2- 7 (pp. 21- 96)**

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- What tasks does Nan expect Rona to do for herself?
- Why does Nan warn Rona to stay away from the cliffs?
- What does Rona discover during her investigations?
- Who is Mungo?
- How does Nan keep herself busy on Rona's first day?
- Who is Sissy? Where does she live? Why does she get in trouble with Wiri?
- What does Wiri discover in the hiding place in his room? Where does he go to read it in peace?
- Where does Rona go to collect the milk?

- Who does the diary that Wiri found belong to? What is the first date in the diary? Where is the man writing the diary from? Why does Wiri decide to keep the diary for himself?
- Why does Rona come to the conclusion that her grandmother can't be bothered with an unknown grandchild? Is this assumption fair? Why/why not?
- Where does Nan go in the middle of the night? What do you think she is looking for?
- What news does Rona's mum give her about her dad?
- What does Rona miss about her old life?
- How does Rona try and make herself useful around the house?
- Why is it hard work reading the diary?
- Why does Wiri have so much trouble getting his family's attention? Why does he decide to take the diary to Mrs Varren?
- How does Rona get herself into trouble when she climbs down to explore Sandy Bay?
- What further information does Wiri find out from the diary? Who is the stowaway discovered on board the ship?
- How does Wiri rescue Rona? Why do you think he downplays the danger that she was in?
- What does Wiri tell Rona about the Ghost Bell?
- How does Wiri's family react when he tells them that he heard the bell? What does Wiri's dad tell him about the bell? What happened to Mrs Varren's husband?
- What is a shearwater? What does Rona find out about them?
- How does Mrs Varren react when she sees the diary? Why does Rona think that she might be related to Jonathan Trevarren?
- Where does Wiri decide to keep the diary? What do he and Mrs Varren promise each other?
- Who boards The Shearwater in Java? What does he bring on board with him? How does Abel Parry discover his secret?
- How does Parry convince others to go along with his plan? Looking back why does Jonathan feel guilty?
- What happened to the men who were against Parry? What happened to the Captain and the officers? What choice was offered to the men held below? Where does Parry order Jonathan to sail the ship to? What happened to the ship? What happened to the men? What was Jonathan's fate?
- What news does Rona's mum give her on the phone?
- How does Nan keep Rona busy? Why does she do this?
- What does Rona discover when her grandmother shows her the path down to the beach?

- What does Jonathan manage to salvage from the wreckage?
- Describe Jonathan's first encounter with the people he grew to consider family.
- Where does Wiri think that Shipwreck Cove might be?
- What does Jonathan find when he returns to the wreck? How does he manage to retrieve it? Why do you think he determined to keep the bell for himself? What does he plan to do with it?

### Discussion

- Why are items such as old diaries so important historically? What can they teach us?
- In what ways is Rona's life at Nan's different from her life at home? Why does Rona feel a bit uncomfortable around her Nan?
- What emotions do you think Rona feels when she is trying unsuccessfully to scale the rocks to safety? What do you think might have happened if Wiri wasn't there to come to the rescue?
- Are you superstitious? Do you believe in bad omens? Why/why not?
- Predict what will happen next in the story.

**Students read Chapters 8- 12 (pp. 97- 160) independently before the next shared session.**

### Comprehension Chapters 8- 12 (pp. 97- 160)

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- Where do Wiri and Rona agree to meet on Friday? What do they discover there?
- Who did Jonathan marry?
- Who helps Jonathan retrieve the treasure? How does he react when he sees what is in the box? What decision does Jonathan come to about the treasure?
- Describe Jonathan's trip to the Bay of Islands. What was unpleasant about the experience? What does Jonathan purchase to take back to his village?
- How does Wiri know that the events Jonathan talks about happened in the area?
- What event spurred Jonathan to build the bell tower? Where did he build it?
- How did Jonathan nearly lose his life a second time? Who rescued him?
- Where did Jonathan write down the instructions for how to find the treasure? Where does Rona suggest that they should look for it?

- What wakes Rona up that night? Where does she think the sound is coming from? What does Nan tell her about the bell?
- Why does Nan think that a change in the weather is coming?
- What scary news does Rona's mum tell her about her dad? How does Nan convince her to carry on with her day?
- Why don't you think Wiri is supposed to take the boat out by himself?
- What amazing news does Wiri give Rona while they are in the dinghy? Where does Wiri's dad believe that Shearwater is built? Why is Rona so pleased by Wiri's news?
- Who sees Wiri and Rona out in the dinghy? Why does she decide not to tell her parents?
- What exciting discovery does Rona make at Ship Cove?
- How does Wiri know that the water comes into the cave? What does Rona find at the end of the cave? What can Wiri and Rona see when they get the torch? How does Wiri injure himself?
- What does Rona notice about the water when she leaves the cave to try and find help? Where is the dinghy?
- Why is it so important for Rona to get Wiri to his feet?
- What sound do Rona and Wiri hear as the water rises? Why does Wiri become so upset when he hears the sound?
- Why does Nan need to find Rona right away? Why does Mrs Thompson begin to get worried about Wiri and Rona? How does she know that Sissy is hiding something?
- Why does Nan feel so terrible when she realises that Rona is missing?
- What information does Mr Thompson give the women when he rings from the village store?
- Where does Rona find the bell?
- How does Rona know that the tide has peaked? Why is it so important that Rona keeps Wiri awake? Why does she make him remove his t-shirt and sweatshirt?
- What realisation does Rona come to about the bell when she takes Wiri's sweatshirt outside the cave?
- Where does Rona think that the shaft above the bell leads to? Why isn't she able to climb up the rope?
- How does Nan know that the children have found the bell? Who sees Nan and Mrs Thompson waving from the cliff? What does Ricky find on the rock? How does Rona know that they have been found?
- Why does it take Mr Thompson so long to free Wiri? Why does Wiri have to stay in hospital overnight?
- Why don't you think Rona's Nan growled her?

- How does Wiri's family and Nan surprise him while he is recovering from his ordeal? Why does Mr Thompson think that Jonathan might have spent all of the treasure?
- What did Rona find in the sand of the cave when she fell off the rope?

### Discussion

- Identify the climax of the story. Why is this event important?
- How does Rona's relationship with her grandmother change during her stay?
- Do you agree with Mr Thompson when he says that the diary is as big a treasure as the bell?
- What main themes or ideas are presented in the novel and how are these developed by the author?

## Activities

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**Plot** - Create a plot graph for *The Shearwater Bell*. Choose 10 important events from the novel and list them in the order that they happen along the horizontal axis of the graph. Label the vertical axis "Level of excitement". Plot each event according to its level of excitement. Clearly mark the climax of the novel.

**Newspaper Article** - Write a newspaper article about Rona and Wiri's brush with death. Use the inverted pyramid style of writing where all of the important information (who, what, where, why and how) go in the first two paragraphs. Remember to include quotes from people involved.

**Interview** - Imagine that you are a John Campbell style interviewer. Your task is to interview Rona about her recent experiences. Formulate 10 interview questions with answers. Have another student act in role as the character of Rona. You may like to video your interview and show it to the rest of the class.

**Static Image** - Design a poster advertising *The Shearwater Bell* that would be appropriate to display in your school library. Remember to combine verbal and visual features to convey your ideas.

**Review** - Write a review for *The Shearwater Bell* suitable for publication in a school magazine. Include information about characters, the style of the book, setting and themes. Discuss the issues raised in the novel. Remember to include your own opinion about the book.

**Personal Effects** - Put together a collection of Jonathan Trevarren's personal effects (objects or things that are important to him). Explain the significance of these items to Jonathan.

**Diary Entry** - Imagine that you are Rona. Write a diary entry for the night after you are rescued from the cave. Describe the events of the day and include your thoughts and feelings about what has happened.

**Family Tree** - Investigate your own family tree.

Notes written by Vicki Ladd