

My Story: Fire in the Sky

The Diary of James Collier, Tarawera, 1886

Author: Shirley Corlett

Synopsis

James Collier is taking the trip of a lifetime with his father. They will travel together from Auckland to see the Pink and White Terraces, known as the Eighth Wonder of the World. They arrive in Te Wairoa to find that all is not well. Disease is rampant amongst the Maori population and strange things are happening on the water of Lake Tarawera. Could this be the result of an old tohunga?

Things become even more strange when James and his father see an eerie sight on the lake. It looks like a Maori war canoe, but how could it be? There have been no war canoes on the lake for many years. Some begin to suspect it is something more sinister—a waka wairua (spirit canoe), an omen of trouble to come.

No one knows it, but beneath the mountain, trouble is brewing. Volcanic forces are gaining strength, and in just a short time the name Tarawera will become infamous throughout New Zealand. Though he survives, James is changed. The images of death and destruction he witnesses will be with him forever.

Sharing the Novel

This novel can be covered in five sections; five shared sessions and four independent reading sessions. It has been divided up as follows: pp 9-20 (teacher reads to the class); and independent reading of pp 21- 64; pp 64 – 92; pp 95 – 133; pp 134 – 177.

During the shared sessions, encourage students to ask questions to clarify understanding.

Introducing the Text

Students should study the cover and read the blurb on the back of the book.

- What time period is covered in this book?
- Where is Tarawera?
- Discuss what happened at Mount Tarawera. What do students already know about the Pink and White Terraces?
- Ask students to read the Author's Note at the beginning of the book. The author states that "*James writes his diary in the language of his time, which reflects the attitudes of the time; very different from those of today.*"
 - What do students think is meant by "the attitudes of the time," and how are they different from those of today? Revisit this question at the end of the book.

- How do they think the language used will be different from today?
- Ask students to rewrite the blurb on the back of the book from James' perspective (first person). They should attempt to write in a style that reflects the way a person in 1886 might speak. (Ask students to keep these paragraphs for an end of novel writing activity).
- Read the Historical Note (pp 175-177) aloud and ask students to take notes, and then write a brief summary of the information.
- As a class, or independently, ask students to research the Pink and White Terraces and/or Mount Tarawera on the internet and to share their findings in a class discussion before reading the book.

The teacher reads pp 9-20 aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension pp 9 – 20

- What do we learn about the main character through his opening diary entries? What is his name? How old is he? Where does he live? What school does he attend? How many sisters does he have?
- Why does his father insist on taking James to the Pink and White Terraces?
- What is James' father's occupation?
- What is the last stop before Te Wairoa?
- What does James find scandalous about the American tourists?
- What career does James decide he wants to pursue?

Discussion

- Why are the occupations of James' sisters' suitors important to the Collier family?
- Can you make any inferences about the family's social class based on what you have read so far?
- New Zealand was experiencing a depression in 1886. What does this mean?
- How and why did the dropping overseas prices for wheat and wool affect the Collier family? Discuss the impacts of economic depressions.
- James has heard speculation that "*the Maori race is dying out.*" Why do people think this could happen? Why did it not happen?
- In what ways is James like a teenager living in the 21st century? In what ways is he different? Are his goals and aspirations different from a typical teen of today?
- James' mother tells of the "*misfortunes of those who have fallen to the temptations of the liquor traffic.*" Discuss what she means by this.
- In 1886, some groups in New Zealand supported prohibition. What does this mean? Discuss the idea of prohibition. Is it something that could work in New Zealand? Ask students to offer ideas for and against prohibition.

Students read pp 21- 64 independently.

Comprehension pp 21- 64

- According to James, what is the population of Auckland in 1886?
- What are the Maori names of the Blue and Green lakes?

- Mr. Ashwell and the natives of Te Wairoa have different explanations for the sickness and disease rampant in the village. What are their respective theories? Why might they differ?
- What does Guide Sophia look like?
- How and where does James meet Will?
- What is the only reason that the native people of Te Wairoa climb Mount Tarawera?
- How were the Pink and White Terraces formed?
- What does Will tell James about the mysterious waka taua?
- To what is the mysterious waka's appearance attributed in the section "Rumours", beginning on p 61?

Discussion

- Do you think James has any preconceptions about Maori? Do you think his feelings are positive, negative or neutral? Support your answer with examples from the text.
- Why do you think Will wants to become a politician?
- What are your initial impressions of Guide Sophia? Does your opinion of her change over the course of this section?
- What emotions does James experience as he explores the Terraces? Have you ever had a similar experience when viewing a natural wonder? Describe your experience.
- Does Will believe that they have seen a waka wairua? Do you believe that people sometimes see or hear things that can't be logically explained?
- Do you consider yourself superstitious? Explain your answer.

Students read pp 64- 92 independently.

Comprehension questions pp 64 – 92

- Why is Guide Sophia concerned about James and his father camping at the Terraces?
- Who planted the many English trees in Te Wairoa?
- What are the rumours about Aporo Te Wharekaniwha's death? Who is said to have cursed him and why? What does Will say he actually died of?
- Why does James think Will would be a good politician?
- How does James prepare the potatoes when he and his father are camping at the Terraces?
- What happens at about 1:15 am on Thursday 10th June, 1886. Why is this significant?

Discussion

- Why does James admire Will? In what ways do you think James wishes he was similar to Will?
- On p 73, Will explains the impact of colonisation on Maori. Discuss his explanation of the changes expected of Maori. Do you think Will feels that colonisation was a positive or negative thing? Why?
- Based on what you know of other indigenous people around the world (e.g. Aborigines, Native Americans, Inuit), how does the Maori experience compare? What are the similarities/differences? Explain.

- Will and James discuss the problems facing Maori (p 87). Compare and contrast the problems facing Maori in 1886 with what you believe are the problems facing Maori today.

Students read pp 95 - 133 independently.

Comprehension questions pp 95 – 133

- What awakens James?
- Describe the size of Mt Tarawera's eruption.
- What other eruptions occur?
- Put the following events in chronological order:
 - the crater Wahanga explodes
 - the entire length of Mount Tarawera erupts
 - James is awakened by an earthquake
 - James and Will try to outrun a dense black cloud of ash
 - the crater Ruawahia erupts
- Which members of the Hazard family survive the eruption of Tarawera? Which do not survive?
- What are the physical obstacles rescuers face when trying to find survivors?
- What horrors do the survivors witness as they travel through the town?
- How does James feel/react when he realises his father is missing?

Discussion

- It is often said that disasters bring out the best and worst in people. What is meant by this? Discuss this idea as it relates to *My Story: Fire in the Sky*.
- Next, discuss what you know of more recent natural disasters (e.g. Boxing Day tsunami; Hurricane Katrina). What acts of heroism relating to these events were there? What examples of these events bringing out the worst in people can you find? Discuss your answer.
- Discuss the fact that James continues to write in his diary even during a time of great crisis. Why do you think he continues to write?
- What do you think are the chances that James' father has survived? What do you think has happened to him?
- What do you think will happen next? Give reasons for your answer.

Students read pp 134 - 177 independently.

Comprehension questions pp 134 – 177

- What is the first thing Mr Collier says to James when he is rescued?
- What did the group at the Hazard home do to try and keep spirits up?
- What makes the paintings Mr Collier did so significant?
- How far away were the effects of the eruption felt?
- Why is the eruption such big news overseas? What makes this event unique amongst the British colonies?

Discussion

- How are James' feelings about Tuhoto different from Chief Wi Kapa and the Maori of Te Wairoa? Why does he feel as he does? Why do the Maori feel differently?
- The experiences of Te Wairoa have changed James. How? What do you think the long term effects of witnessing such a disaster will be?
- What other kinds of events have the capacity to change people forever? Make a list, at first independently, and then with a partner.
- Discuss the quarrel that James has with Will. What position does each boy take?
- What do you think ultimately killed Tuhoto?
- Discuss where you think Will and James will each be in twenty years.

Activities

Research

- Research one of the following topics, relevant to New Zealand in 1886: suffrage; temperance; Maori – Pakeha relations; reaction to the eruption of Mount Tarawera; economic depression. Prior to beginning your research, formulate four focussing questions to guide your research. Keep a log that records the research process. Prepare your findings as an oral presentation, report, PowerPoint presentation, eye-catching poster, tri-fold poster or other appropriate format for your topic.
- Many elements of nature are referenced in *My Story: Fire in the Sky* (e.g. fantails, tomtits, flax, toetoe). Create a Nature Guide, based on an element mentioned in the book, such as Plants, Animals, or Rocks (Geology). You will need to supplement what is mentioned in the book with additional research on the plants, animals or rocks found in the region. Your guide should include illustrations or photographs, descriptions, fascinating facts and the scientific name and Maori name (e.g. the fantail is also called the piwakawaka, scientific name *rhipidura fuliginosa*) for each item in your guide.

Visual Arts

- Create a visual representation of an element of the book. There are a number of ways to approach this task. You might create a three dimensional model of Te Wairoa, a painting of the Pink and White Terraces, the front page of a newspaper circa June 1886 or a sketch of what you imagine one of the characters in the book to look like.
- Imagine that this book is going to be turned into a movie. Create a poster promoting the movie. Would you keep the same title? What are the most important images to show on a movie poster? Who is your target audience? What words will you use to invoke interest and encourage people to see it? Remember to do your research on what movie posters look like – what features do they have? What layout styles do they use? Include a brief paragraph explaining what research you conducted, what existing posters you used and why you chose these posters to help you with your design. To start, students may like to study posters in the newspaper, their local video shop or at the cinema.

Writing

- Put students in pairs or small groups and ask them to edit the paragraphs they wrote for the *Introducing the Text* exercise on first person narration/voice of the period. Ask them to add more detail to their blurb, or revise their blurb based on what they have

read, and make the appropriate revisions to reflect the voice used in the narration of *My Story: Fire in the Sky*.

- Create a glossary that could be used by other students reading this book. You may create a glossary of Maori words used in the book (e.g.: mana; waka taua; tapu; tohunga, etc.). Alternately, you may create a glossary of language commonly used in 1886 (e.g.: suitor; by Jove; dally; temperance; on the morrow, etc.).
- Will and James plan to keep in touch through letters. Write a letter from one to the other a number of years into the future. Consider what their ages, occupations and avocations might be in the future. Reference events happening in New Zealand at the time your letter is written. Choose a friend or partner to reply appropriately to your letter.

Debate

- Divide the class into small groups and ask them to choose a position on the following proposition:

Maori in New Zealand were better off as a result of colonisation.

Prior to beginning the debate, ask teams to not only research colonisation, but also choose relevant events and passages from *My Story: Fire in the Sky* as evidence and support for the arguments they use. For example, on page 87 Will makes points both for and against this proposition. He implies that Maori need to improve health and literacy, things they might learn from the Europeans. However, he also points out that land has been unjustly confiscated.