

# My New Zealand Story: Pandemic Spanish Flu, 1918

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### Synopsis

Freda Rose is 11 years old. She lives with her mother, father and grandmother on a farm in Southill Downs, New Zealand. Her older brother Bobby has gone to be a stretcher-bearer in the war. Freda is a typical young girl who enjoys school and being with her friends. She helps her mother around the house and does chores on the farm. World War I is drawing to a close and Freda is looking forward to her brother's return from overseas.

But what Freda doesn't know is that a deadly disease will also return from Europe; a disease that will kill many more than the war. The Spanish Flu spreads quickly and kills even the youngest and strongest. Sometimes its victims die only hours after experiencing the first symptoms. Freda's life changes dramatically as a result of the pandemic. She can no longer attend school or any places where people gather in large groups. Her services are soon required when people in her community start dying. She and her mother begin working with other women to feed the sick and look after those who are in strife.

Then the flu strikes Freda's own family. Her father and grandfather are afflicted with the disease. Freda and her mother work tirelessly to nurse them back to health but the disease proves too strong for her elderly grandmother, who dies. Grief-stricken, Freda looks forward to the return of her brother Bobby, but the man who returns is disfigured, angry and broken. Freda no longer knows how to relate to him and doesn't know how to help him overcome his anger and disillusionment. People are dying everywhere leaving children orphaned and women and children alone. Freda's life will never be the same again.

### Text Type

*Pandemic: Spanish flu, 1918* is a fictional diary about New Zealand's worst ever pandemic. It is the latest in the hugely popular *My New Zealand Story* series and is based on the Spanish Flu pandemic that swept through New Zealand at the end of World War I. The novel will appeal to both boys and girls who are interested in history. The story is told from first person point of view in diary form. Through the eyes of 11-year-old Freda Rose the reader is given fascinating insights into New Zealand during World War I and after the war ends. Life is not easy. There are no modern conveniences in 1918 and many chores are labour intensive.

Freda is a likeable and resilient character who has to deal with loss and hardship. Her family is not wealthy and with her father being sick, they have trouble working the farm.

Themes include family, tragedy, the changing role of women during the war, community spirit and the devastating effects that war can have on those who have to fight.

## Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: pp. 8–24, pp. 25–97 and pp. 98–145.

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. Encourage them to conduct some library research about World War I so that they understand the context of the novel. Have students analyse Freda's character and explain how she is shaped by her experiences. Have them compare and contrast their lives today with Freda's in the early 1900's. Students should discuss the effects of war on the young men who returned and the changing role of women during this time.

## Introducing the Novel

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

- When and where is the story set?
- What do you think a pandemic is?
- Who is the main character in the story? What do we learn about her from the blurb?
- The story is told in diary form. What do we expect from a story told like this?

*Read the Historical Note (p. 147) and look at the photographs at the end of the story.*

- Why is the 1918 influenza epidemic considered New Zealand's worst natural disaster?
- Why do you think the flu killed more Maori than Pakeha?
- How many died in the pandemic worldwide?
- What was unusual about the Spanish Flu?
- What event did the Flu pandemic coincide with?
- What Act was introduced after the pandemic?
- What is the difference between an epidemic and a pandemic?
- What are the symptoms of influenza?
- What do you think the inhalation chambers were for?

Teacher reads pp. 8–24 aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

### Comprehension pp. 8–24

- What does Freda call her diary?
- Why has she had a falling out with Pearl Bennett?
- Where is Freda's brother Bobby? How long has he been gone?
- How does Bobby's mother's reaction to him going to war differ from his father's? Why do you think this is?
- Who are the Hun?
- How did World War I start? Which countries belong to the Allies? Who are they fighting against?
- Describe the scene at the train station when Freda and her parents go to see Bobby off to war.
- What is the name of Freda's teacher? Why is her name appropriate?
- What is a conscientious objector? What happened to them?
- What roles women expected to take at home while the men were off at war?

### Discussion

- Why do you think so many young men enlist in the army? How do you think the reality of the war differed from their perceptions?
- In what ways is Freda's home life different to yours? If you lived in the early 1900's what modern convenience would you miss the most and why?
- What is Freda's school like? How is it different to yours? Why do you think corporal punishment has been banned?
- What is compulsory military training? Do you agree with this? Why/why not?

Students read pp. 25–97 independently before the next shared session.

### Comprehension pp. 25–97

- Who knocks on the door in the morning? What does the fact that Freda's mum offers him food suggest about her character? How do we know that Freda's dad doesn't agree with what her mother does?
- What does Freda's father expect her to do when she leaves school?
- Why wasn't Freda's dad allowed to fight in the war? How does he feel about this?
- Who is Tom?

- Why is Freda upset with Tom?
- Describe washday.
- Why are some of the words in Bobby's postcards blacked out?
- Why does Ted put his feet in cow pee?
- How does Freda's mum react when she asks her about Henrietta? Why do you think she reacts like this?
- Why does everyone dread the sight of telegram boys?
- Describe what it is like for the men in the trenches.
- Why is it so important for the men to have lots of pairs of socks?
- Why do Freda and her family go to visit the Edwards's?
- How does Freda react when she realises that Henrietta has been killed? How does her father punish her?
- Why does the Health Nurse come to school? Who does she embarrass in front of all the children?
- What is comfort-shop day?
- What is a deserter? What happens to them if they are caught?
- Who grabs Freda behind the shed? Why do you think Freda feeds him?
- Why is it so important that Freda doesn't tell her father about the man?
- What does Freda's mum use the kerosene tins full of dripping for?
- Why does Freda think that the Allies are winning the war?
- How does Freda earn her five shillings?
- Who is Roma? Why is Freda keen to go to her house?
- Why is Freda so scared of her father? Is his treatment of her justified? Why/why not?
- Why does Joseph Brown run away from school?
- Why is Freda's mother crying when she arrives home from school?
- Why is Mr Heinhold thinking of moving?
- What does the telegram say about Bobby? What is mustard gas and what does it do to its victims?
- What is important about Saturday 19 October?

- What is Australia doing to try and stop the spread of the flu?
- Why doesn't Freda's dad want Aunt Ida to come and stay? What does this suggest about his character given her situation?
- What is the largest petition ever presented to parliament about?
- How do the people in New Zealand believe the disease got to their shores? Why is the Spanish flu compared to the Black Death?
- Why does Pearl come to school looking so upset?
- How does Pearl feel when she finds out that her mother is really her aunt?
- Who is most susceptible to the flu? Why is this surprising?
- Why can't Aunty Ida come and stay?
- Why does Walter's sister Amy go to Auckland?
- What happens to George Sullivan when he can't remember the capital of England? How do you think this would have made him feel?
- What does Freda learn about Bobby's injuries from his letter?
- Why is Auckland so short of doctors and nurses?
- What is an inhalation sprayer? Do you think these worked? Why/why not?
- Why is the school closed? What else is ordered closed when the flu is declared a "notifiable infectious disease?"

### Discussion

- What do you think might have happened to Freda and her family if her father was allowed to fight and there was no one left to run the farm?
- What chores and activities that we can do easily create a lot of work for Freda and her family?
- Why do you think that mail was censored during the war?
- What evidence is there in the story to suggest that times are tough for people during this period?
- In what ways do the women left behind support the war effort?
- What is propaganda? What do you think it is used for in wartime?
- Why do you think German and Austrian families were moved to a camp during the war? Was this fair? Why/why not?

- Pearl doesn't know whether she is "Arthur or Martha" after she finds out that the person who she thought was her mother is actually her aunt. Why is it so important to know who you are and where you come from?

Students read pp. 98–145 independently before the next shared session.

### Comprehension pp. 98–145

- What happens when Freda and her family arrive in town on the day of the show? Describe the atmosphere in town. How does it change as the day progresses?
- Why is the letter from Bobby so disturbing?
- What happens on Saturday 9th November? Why is the day one for celebrations and concern?
- How do the people of Christchurch celebrate the end of the war?
- What does going into "quarantine" mean?
- What do Freda and her mother experience on the tram?
- Who is put in charge of the committee to fight influenza?
- Why do you think Freda's dad doesn't want them volunteering?
- In what way does the ban on public gathering affect Freda's life?
- What precautions are people to take to help them avoid getting the flu?
- Who is Jimmy? What is his role?
- Why is Freda so happy about volunteering at the soup kitchen?
- What does Freda overhear the ladies saying about the school shed? How does this make her feel?
- How does the city deal with all of the people who are sick and need beds?
- Describe Freda's trip into town with her mother. Why does her mother complain about the greengrocer? What do they see when they get to the chemist?
- What happens to Freda's father?
- Why does Freda consider herself an angel of mercy? Do you agree?
- What are Freda's dad's symptoms? What does Freda's mum do to try and protect those who go into his room? Why does Freda think that her grandmother might be getting sick too?

- Why is Freda so angry with her mother?
- Why does Freda feel sorry for Maori people?
- What do Freda and Tom do to help their neighbours? Why is Freda curious to see inside the cottage with the red roses outside? What does she see when she enters?
- How does Freda's mother react when she takes the baby home?
- How does Freda know that her grandmother is getting sicker?
- How does Freda feel when her grandmother dies? What effect does her death have on Freda's mother? Why does Freda's father put the white flag in the mailbox?
- How much does Bobby miss seeing his grandmother by?
- How does Freda feel when she sees Bobby? In what ways has the war changed him?
- Why do you think Bobby gets angry when Freda asks him questions about the war?
- What does Freda find out about the baby from her neighbours? Why does Freda think this is good news?
- What does Freda's mum let her do as a surprise? Why does Freda feel closer to Pearl after this event?
- What does Freda mean when she says on Wednesday 4th December that "things are slowly getting back to normal"?
- Why does Freda think that some of the women are going to miss the Patriotic Committees?
- What does Bobby do with his army uniform? Why does he do this?
- Who is going to help Freda's family on the farm?
- Why is Freda so eager to keep the baby? What do you think happened to all of the orphaned children after the epidemic?

### Discussion

- What does the fact that so many people volunteered and helped their neighbours suggest about the sense of community spirit in Christchurch? Why do disasters sometimes bring out the best in people?
- How is Freda's life changed by the war and the pandemic?
- What lessons has this book taught you?
- Why does Freda begin to question her faith during this time?
- What does the story teach us about the effects of war?

## Activities

**Research** – Choose an interesting aspect of World War I to conduct a research assignment on. Formulate focussing questions, come up with possible sources of information and record the research process. Present your information as a poster, in an essay or in a speech.

**Letter** – Imagine that you are Freda. Write a letter to Bobby as he recuperates in hospital after his injury.

**Plot** – Choose 10 important events that occur in the story. Draw a flow diagram that lists the events in the order that they occur.

**Character** – Draw a picture of Freda on a large piece of paper. On one side of the paper list all of her positive characteristics and qualities. On the other side list her negative characteristics. Include quotes and evidence from the story to back up your ideas.

**News Report** – Imagine that you are a news reporter. Write a feature article about the celebrations that occurred in Christchurch after the end of the war ended. Include quotes from locals and returned servicemen. Try and capture the feeling of excitement that surrounded this event.

**Static Image** – Design a health pamphlet that shows people what sorts of things they can do to keep themselves safe from the flu.

**Family Relationships** – Describe Freda's relationship with each family member. Who is she closest to and why? Who does she have conflict with and why does this conflict occur? Find evidence from the text to support your ideas.

**Review** – Write a book review for *Pandemic*. Include information about what kind of book it is and what it is about. Describe the setting of the story and explain why it is important. Write about Freda's and the challenges that she faces. Remember to include your personal opinion about the novel.

**Poster** – Design a poster advertising the novel for your school library. Remember to combine verbal and visual features to convey your ideas. Include illustrations and images from the text to make your poster appealing and encourage others to read the book.

Notes written by Vicki Ladd