

My Story: Escape from Sarau

The Diary of Emilie Ritter 1882-83

Author: Leone Morris-Bensemman

Synopsis

Emilie Ritter is 14 years-old. She lives in Sarau village, a tiny German settlement near Nelson with her mother, father, 3 sisters and 3 brothers. Emilie is unhappy with her life. She craves adventure and longs to escape the drudgery of her life. Forbidden to attend school in Nelson Emilie spends her days looking after her younger siblings, cooking, cleaning and gardening. Emilie is a rebellious daughter and is in constant conflict with her father, a devoutly religious church minister. Her father believes that “to spare the rod is to spoil the child” and constantly punishes Emilie for her transgressions by using violence.

One day Emilie’s world is turned upside down when Ludwig Kramer, a handsome missionary, arrives in the valley. Ludwig is 19 years old and he and Emilie quickly establish a rapport. They both enjoy reading and horseback riding. When Ludwig leaves the village to work at a Mission in Waitotara, near Wanganui, Emilie is spurred into action. Instead of returning home from her sister Eva’s house, Emilie decides to follow Ludwig. She takes a boat from Nelson to Wanganui, stays overnight in a boarding house and then narrowly escapes being sexually assaulted during the carriage ride to the Mission. However Emilie’s reunion with Ludwig is not all as she imagined it would be. While he is happy to see her he believes that she is too young to endure life at the Mission, which can be dangerous. He insists that she return home to her family.

All is not lost for Emilie. She continues her relationship with Ludwig and when she turns 15, her proposes to her. Initially her parents are happy about the proposal. They soon change their minds however, when Emilie’s father receives a report about the situation at the Mission. The local Maori are disgruntled with the white settlers because of disputes over land. The Mission is a dangerous place to live and fearing for Emilie’s safety, her parents refuse to allow her to go. Is Emilie doomed to live a life of drudgery with her bullying, violent father, or will Ludwig be able to convince her parents that their courageous and talented daughter has what it takes to survive at the Mission?

Text Type

Escape from Sarau – The Diary of Emilie Ritter 1882-83 is a fascinating story about life in a tiny German immigrant village. The story is told in diary form from the point of view of Emilie, a 14 year-old girl. Through her diary entries we learn about the drudgery and monotony of her life, and her thoughts and feelings about her situation. The story is set in 1882-83 and students will be interested in how different life was back then - particularly for women. It was not unusual for girls as young as 14 or 15 to get married and have children of their own. Girls generally did not work or receive much schooling. They were expected to help around the house, looking after younger siblings, washing, cooking, cleaning, gardening and milking cows – all without the aid of the modern conveniences that we enjoy today. Other aspects of Emilie's life that students will find interesting are the elements of German culture that her family retain and the fact that they are deeply traditional and religious.

Emilie is a likeable heroine. She is courageous and determined to follow her own dreams, rather than let society dictate to her how she should behave and what she should be.

Themes include the oppressiveness of a religious and sexist society, family life, abuse, love, loss and facing the unknown.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Historical Note and Photographs (pp. 173-191) and pp. 9-22, pp. 23-112 and pp. 115-171.

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. Have them read the Historical Note at the end of the novel so that they understand the setting and social climate in the story. Encourage students to compare and contrast their lives with Emilie's and examine how the roles of women have changed over time. Students should familiarise themselves with the glossary provided at the start of the novel. Encourage them to examine the characters, their motivations and how they develop throughout the story.

Introducing the Novel

Discussion

Study the front cover of the novel and read the blurb.

- What kind of novel is this? What do you expect from a novel told in diary form?
- Who does the diary belong to?
- Where and when is the story set?
- Why does Emilie want to escape from her life?
- Who arrives in the valley and offers Emilie a ray of hope?

- How will a story set in 1882-83 be different from a story set today?

Students read the Historical Note and look at the Photographs (pp. 173-191).

- What is Sarau known as today?
- Where were the nearest secondary schools to Sarau?
- Describe a typical day in the life of a girl in the 1880's.
- Why did the church bell toll at 5 o'clock on Sunday afternoons?
- How many German families lived in Sarau in the 1880's? What elements of German culture did they retain?
- How long did the journey from Germany to Nelson use to take?
- What challenges did the German missionaries face in the 1880's?
- Describe a typical missionary's medicine chest.

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

Comprehension (pp. 9-22)

- Why is Emilie so dissatisfied with her life?
- How old is Emilie? Where does she live? Who does she live with?
- Why isn't Emilie allowed to go to school in Nelson?
- How does Emilie's father punish her for her outburst?
- Why does Emilie want to move to Nelson? What does she want to do for a job?
- Who is the visitor to the house? Why does Lottie tease Emilie about him? What observations does Emilie make about him?
- Describe Emilie's Great Escape Plan. What worthwhile things does she want to do with her life?
- What extra information does Emilie learn about Herr Kramer when he comes for dinner?

Discussion

- Describe the setting of the story. Focus on time, place and social climate.
- What are your initial impressions of Emilie's father? What are his values? What is his attitude towards women? Why do you think he punishes Emilie by using violence?
- Why is there so much conflict between Emilie and her father?
- What is Emilie's attitude towards God and religion? How does her attitude differ from her parents'?
- What would it be like marrying at 15? Why doesn't being "married off" appeal to Emilie?
- Predict what is going to happen in the story next.

Students read pp. 23-112 independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension (pp. 23-112)

- What happened to Prinz? Which family member is the most upset about his death? How does his father react to his grief? Why does he react like this?
- Why do you think the father hits Emilie and the other children? Who does Emilie decide to talk to about her father's abuse?
- Why does Emilie have to make the trip into town? Why does she feel like she has earned her trip away? Who does she stay with?
- What advice does the doctor give Emily?
- What is Eva like? Why does she consider herself lucky in some ways? How does she try and help her sister?
- Why does Emilie return home to more work, not less?
- Describe Emilie's encounter with Herr K at choir practise. What gives Emilie the impression that Herr K might prefer her to the other girls? How does Emilie feel after talking to him about her aspirations for the future? What does she learn about his life at the Mission?
- How do Emilie and Herr K get to know each other better?
- How does Emilie injure her leg? What does Herr K do to try and make Emilie's convalescence more bearable?
- How much is it going to cost Emilie to reach the Mission? What suggestion does Ludwig come up with for earning money?
- Where does Emilie find work?
- Why doesn't Emilie enjoy her first night working at the inn?
- Why does Emilie feel insecure around the Evans' girls?
- What prompts Emilie to finally tell Oma about her father's abuse? How does Oma react to her confession? What advice does she give Emilie?
- Why is the party one of the "worst nights of the year" for Emilie?
- Who is Mrs Long? What does she employ Emilie to do?
- Why does Emilie find Mrs Long so interesting? Why is she so envious of the life that she leads?
- How does her father react when he learns that Mrs Long wants Emilie to go painting with her? Why does he react this way? What does father threaten Emilie with if she doesn't start being more respectful?
- Why is Emilie so upset when she receives Ludwig's note?
- Who does Ludwig go riding with instead of Emilie? What explanation does he give the family for his change of plans?
- How does Emilie's behaviour change after this event? Why does Emilie feel like Ludwig betrayed her trust?
- What illness does Wolfgang contract? Why does Emilie feel like God is punishing her for what she has done?
- How does Emilie react to her brother's death? How does Ludwig try and support the family during this difficult time?
- What does Ludwig tell Emilie about the riding incident on the day of Wolfgang's funeral? Why is Emilie so confused about her feelings when Ludwig apologises for his behaviour?
- How does the family try and keep busy after Wolfgang's death?

- Why does Emilie run away to Oma's? What explanation does Oma provide Emilie that helps explain father's behaviour? Who does she send Emilie to stay with?
- In what ways is Oma "more than a match" for father?
- How does Emilie feel after Ludwig kisses her?
- Explain Emilie's timetable for running away.
- What details does Emilie quiz Ludwig about when he visits her at Eva's? Why doesn't Emilie tell Ludwig about her plan?
- What information does Emilie include in her letter to Eva? What does she leave out?
- Why does Emilie find the boat trip so unpleasant?
- Where does Emilie go once she reaches Wanganui? How does the woman there treat her?
- Describe what happens to Emilie on the train. Who comes to her rescue? What does Emilie tell him about herself? Why does she lie?
- What advice does the guard give Emilie after he expels the man from the train?
- How does Ludwig react when Emilie turns up at the Mission? Why does he react like this? Who does Ludwig blame for Emilie's sudden appearance?
- Why can't Emilie stay at the Mission?
- Why does Ludwig insist that Emilie return home? How old does he think she needs to be before she leaves home? How does Emilie feel about his suggestion?
- Why do Emilie and Ludwig argue?
- Why does Emilie begin to have regrets about her actions?
- Describe Emilie's arrival at the wharf. Why is her father so angry with her? Why does he believe that Emilie has brought shame on the family?

Discussion

- Describe Mutti. What is her role in the family? In what ways does she try and make life easier for her children? Why doesn't she stand up to her husband?
- Describe a typical day in Emilie's life. What modern conveniences do we have today that would have made her life easier? How does her role in the family differ from yours in the 21st century?
- Why isn't Emilie happy to accept things as they are? What are her hopes and dreams?
- Why is Emilie so attracted to Herr K? How does he treat her? How does he make her feel good about herself and build her confidence? How does his attitude towards her goals and dreams differ from her father's?
- How does Emilie feel about Ludwig's relationship with the Evans' girls? Is Ludwig being fair to Emilie by pursuing a friendship with them? Why/why not?
- How does Wolfgang's death affect the family?

- What could Emilie have done besides run away that might have improved her situation? Does Ludwig do the right thing when he sends her home? Why/why not?
- Do you think Emilie's relationship with her father will change after her return home? Why/why not?
- Predict what will happen in the story next.

Students read pp. 115-171 independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension (pp. 115-171)

- What actions did father take after Emilie went missing to locate his daughter? What do his actions suggest about his feelings for Emilie?
- How do Ludwig's letters make Emilie feel?
- What information about the Mission is contained in the progress report that Ludwig's brother sends Emilie's father?
- What does Ludwig give Emilie for her birthday? What does Ludwig discuss with Emilie's parents during his visit?
- Why do you think father has stopped hitting Emilie since her return home?
- Why is Emilie still uncertain about Ludwig's feelings for her? What does she become suspicious about when Ludwig fails to write to her for a long time?
- Why is Emilie so excited about her visit to the Evans'? Why doesn't father want her fraternising with the family? What happens when he catches her waving goodbye to her new friends?
- What news is contained in the two letters from Ludwig?
- What good news does Eva give the family? How does Mutti react to the news?
- Why does staying with Eva strengthen Emilie's resolve not to get married young?
- What does Eva name her baby? How does Emilie feel about motherhood?
- Why is June 16, 1883 the most important day in Emilie's life?
- Why is Emilie against marrying Ludwig immediately? Why is her father against a long engagement? How does Mutti feel about it?
- Why was father initially reluctant to allow Emilie to live at the Mission? What information has he recently received that makes him believe that she will be safe there?
- What doubts does Emilie have about becoming a wife and mother?
- What does Emilie discuss with her parents when she is called into the parlour? What has made Father and Mutti change their minds about allowing Emilie to live at the Mission? Why do they now believe that Ludwig would be better off with an older wife?
- Why do you think Emilie's parents are so protective of her?
- What is Oma's opinion about Emilie's parents' decision? Why does this surprise Emilie?

- Why does Emilie decide not to marry Ludwig?
- What arguments does Ludwig present to Father about why Emilie should marry him? How does he make his arguments convincing? Why does Emilie change her mind and help Ludwig convince her parents?
- What emotions does Emilie feel when her parents give the couple permission to marry?
- What presents do Ludwig and Emilie receive at their engagement party that will help when they set up their own home?
- Why does Emilie believe that she has “plenty to learn”?
- Who will look after Emilie in Wellington? What advice does her family give her before she leaves?

Discussion

- What evidence is there in the story to suggest that Emilie’s father cares about her and wants what’s best for her? Do you believe that her father is disciplining her or abusing her? Explain your answer. Does having good intentions justify his behaviour? Why/why not? What reasons can you come up with for his behaviour?
- What challenges do couples who marry young face? In what ways will Emilie’s life change when she goes to live at the Mission? Do you think she will fulfil her dreams? Why/why not? How would you feel if you were in her position?
- Compare and contrast the roles of women in the 1880’s versus today. Have any of the expectations of women remained the same?

Activities

Research – Using information provided in the novel and your own additional research write an essay on a particular aspect of life during the 1880’s. You may want to research the role of women, family relationships, the life of a Missionary or the challenges faced by immigrants living in New Zealand.

Family Relationships – Describe Emilie’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.

Research – Conduct a research assignment about child abuse in New Zealand. Formulate 4 open-ended focussing questions to guide your research. Use a range of sources including written, oral and visual and record your research process. Present your information as a speech, on a poster or as a report.

Review – Write a book review for *Escape from Sarau*. 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 Emilie and the challenges that she faces. Remember to include your personal opinion about the novel.

Conflict – Identify an important conflict that occurs in the novel. Explain why the conflict occurs and how it is resolved. Back up your ideas with quotes from the text.

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.

Character – Complete a character profile for Emilie. Include her name, age and position in the family. Include information about her life, her interests and aspirations. Describe her characteristics and attributes. Identify the challenges that she faces and how she overcomes them. Include specific quotes and examples from the novel to back up your ideas.

Theme – Choose an important theme and explain how it is developed in the novel.

Plot – Create a flow diagram that shows 15 important events from the story in the order that they occur.