

# ***Finding Isabella***

Author: **Alison Robertson**

## **Synopsis**

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Stacey Harper has been having a hard time of it lately. A while ago her father up and left her mother and now lives in Wellington with his new girlfriend, Daphne. Stacey's mother has had a lot of trouble dealing with the break-up. She hasn't returned to work and has been battling depression. Stacey has been struggling with her own feelings about her father's sudden departure. She needs to adapt to family life living only with her brothers and her mother, and try and resolve the feelings of anger that she has towards her father for destroying her home life and her mother's happiness. To make matters worse, Zac, Stacey's boyfriend, has just run off with Lisa, her best friend.

When Stacey's teacher gives the class an assignment to research and write about an ancestor, Stacey is initially stumped. Then her mother suggests that she find out more about Isabella, her father's great-great-grandmother. Her mother gives her Isabella's daybook, a kind of diary. As Stacey reads through the diary she becomes disheartened. Isabella's life seemed incredibly boring – an endless series of visits to friends and attending church functions. But then Stacey begins to suspect that there is more to Isabella than meets the eye. She has been writing in code. Hours of pouring over the diary, referencing and cross-checking, leads Stacey to believe that Isabella was involved in a sordid scandal – something that would change her life forever.

Then Stacey's mum tells her that she has been invited to spend her holidays with her dad and Daphne in Wellington. Stacey tells her in no uncertain terms that she is not interested. However, her mum won't let it go – she insists that he is still her father and loves her. When Stacey realises that she may be able to find out more about Isabella from the National Library, she reluctantly agrees to visit her father, but she is far from happy about the situation.

Stacey is made to feel even worse when she arrives in Wellington and inadvertently discovers that Daphne is pregnant. As more of Isabella's story is revealed Stacey is learning lessons in her own life – adult relationships are complicated and things don't always turn out exactly how you want them to.

## Text Type

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*Finding Isabella* is a story about growing up and dealing with change. Aimed at a teenage audience the novel will appeal particularly to girls. The story is set in New Zealand and the main character, Stacey Harper, a Year 9 student, is realistic and likeable. Many readers will be able to relate to the challenges and problems that Stacey faces as she struggles to understand and accept her father's new relationship. Stacey is also betrayed by her boyfriend and her best friend, who go behind her back and start dating each other.

Stacey's school project to research an ancestor helps distract her from her problems. As her story gradually unfolds Isabella's life provides a sharp contrast to Stacey's. Students will find the details revealed about life in the late 1800's fascinating – particularly the social climate. The role of women during this time was vastly different to today. They were inferior to men, expected to marry, stay home and raise children. Society placed strict moral expectations on them and the punishment for not adhering to these expectations was often complete exile from society. As Stacey finds out more about her daring and non-conformist aunt she also finds out about herself.

## Sharing the Novel

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***The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 7-25), Chapters 3-10 (pp. 26-101) and Chapter 11-Epilogue (pp. 102-176).***

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas raised in the novel. Have them make inferences and relate Stacey's experiences to their own lives and broader understanding. Students should analyse the main character and discuss what challenges and problems she faces, how she deals with them and what lessons she learns from her experiences. Encourage students to identify themes and messages in the novel and how they are developed by the author. Students should back up their ideas with specific evidence and examples from the text.

## Introducing the Novel

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### Discussion

- What do you know about life in the late 1800's? How did life then contrast with life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Consider aspects such as social climate and the role of women. Life was far more conservative back then. Consider things that you are allowed to do today that would have been unacceptable back then.
- Have you ever completed any research on an ancestor? Who was the ancestor and what did you find out? Why is it important to have an idea about where you come from and who your family is? What would be some good sources of information to use if you were completing a

research assignment on an ancestor? What sort of challenges do you think an assignment like this might present?

- How many of you have parents who are no longer together? How did you deal with the situation initially? What were your thoughts and feelings about it? Do either of your parents have new partners? How do you feel about them? Why is divorce often difficult for children to deal with?
- Have any of you ever been betrayed by someone you considered a friend? If so, explain what happened. Is it possible for trust to be rebuilt after a betrayal? Explain your answer.

**Teacher reads Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 7-25) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.**

## **Comprehension Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 7-25)**

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- Who is the narrator of the story? What information do we learn about her in Chapter 1?
- Who is Lisa? How is Lisa different to Stacey? What aspects of Lisa's life does Stacey envy?
- Who turned up at Lisa's parent's party?
- What does Stacey see through the binoculars at the beach races? How does she react to what she sees?
- How does Stacey react when her mother asks her about her day? Why don't you think Stacey wants to confide in her mother?
- Name Stacey's brothers. What are they like? Why does Stacey get so frustrated with them?
- Who tries to talk to Stacey on her way to school?
- What happens when Stacey sits down to play the piano? Why doesn't she want to play at assembly?
- What does Stacey miss about being with Zac?
- Who does Lisa sit next to in English? Why does Stacey believe that the pair are talking about her? How does she retaliate?

### **Discussion**

- How has Stacey's father's departure affected her mother? What do we know so far about the circumstances surrounding his departure? How has the family's home life changed? What extra responsibilities has Stacey had since her dad left?
- How does Stacey feel about Zac and Lisa's betrayal? Stacey didn't love Zac. Does she really have the right to be so upset? Explain your answer. How does Stacey deal with the situation? What would you do if you were in her position?
- Predict what is going to happen in the story next.

**Students read Chapters 3-10 (pp. 26-101) independently before the next shared session.**

## Comprehension Chapters 3 - 10 (pp. 26-101)

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- Where does Stacey go after school on Mondays? Why isn't she looking forward to going?
- How does Stacey show her frustrations with Zac at tennis practise? How does her coach react to her outburst?
- Why does Stacey feel guilty after her mother speaks to her in her bedroom?
- What is Stacey's school holiday assignment? Who does Stacey's mum suggest that she research? What does she give Stacey to use as a basis for her research?
- What does Stacey's mum tell her about her dad's letter? How does Stacey react to this proposition?
- How does Stacey fill in her time so that she is distracted from what Zac and Lisa might be doing?
- Who approaches Stacey in the school library? Why is Stacey initially reluctant to talk to her? Why do you think she changes her mind?
- What does Emma say to Stacey that makes her question how she is behaving?
- How does Stacey get her hair cut? Why does she feel that it's time for a new look?
- What information does Stacey's mum find out about Isabella's daybook while Stacey is at school? Why is Stacey still uninspired by the contents of the daybook?
- Who is the "group" that ends up going to the movies? Why is Emma so embarrassed when her parents come to pick them up?
- Who does Stacey bump into at the bus stop? How does this make her feel?
- How does Lisa try and make Stacey feel uncomfortable during the bus ride? What does Zac say to Stacey when he approaches her on the bus? Why do you think Stacey agrees to help him out?
- What does Stacey find on the table when she gets up early to look at the daybook? Summarise the information that her mother found out about Isabella.
- What inspires Stacey's mother to go back to work? What does she want Stacey to do in the first week of the holidays?
- Who does Stacey decide to visit to try and find out more information about Isabella?
- Why is Stacey so surprised when she reads in the daybook that Isabella was alone with Jim?
- What does Stacey's mother give Stacey on the morning of the tennis game? How does Stacey react to this "gift"?
- What information does Stacey give Emma about Granny Rose on the way to the nursing home?

- Why does Stacey decide to play the piano for Granny Rose? Why does she believe that there is a “major flaw in growing up and growing old amongst the generations”?
- Why doesn't Granny or her other family members mention Isabella's name? Who do you think Annie might be? Why doesn't Emma want to go home to her own house after they get back from the nursing home?
- What does Stacey discover about Isabella from the daybook when she and Emma continue researching? What is the name of the boat that Isabella travels on? Why does Stacey find Isabella's diary entries so confusing?
- What is Emma's opinion about Lisa? Why does Stacey miss Lisa?
- What proposal does Stacey make to Emma about the holidays?
- Where do Isabella and her travel companions arrive on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1885?
- What shocking event occurs on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1885? What does Stacey mean when she says “Do you think she was sent away in disgrace”? What suggestion does Stacey's mother come up with for the identities of J and C?
- How does Stacey find out the identity of the father of Isabella's illegitimate baby?
- How does Stacey's mum finally convince her to go to Wellington?
- How does Liam react when he finds out Stacey is going to Wellington? Why does he react this way?
- Who picks Stacey up from the bus stop?
- Why is Stacey so surprised by Daphne's appearance? How does Stacey feel being alone in the car with Daphne?
- How does Stacey react when she sees her dad? In what ways has Stacey's dad changed?
- How does Stacey react to Daphne's attempts to get to know her?
- Who turns up just as dinner is being served? What shocking information does he reveal to Stacey? How does Stacey react to the news?

### Discussion

- It would have been really hard for Linda Harper to encourage Stacey to go and stay with her ex-husband and Daphne in the holidays. What does the fact that she is willing to set her own feelings aside suggest about her character? Why is it important that Stacey maintain a relationship with her father? Do you think it is fair that Stacey's parents insisted that she visit? Why/why not?
- When Stacey visits Granny Harper she learns that the family doesn't mention Isabella's name because of “skeletons and scandals”. What do you think the scandal surrounding Isabella might be? Are there any skeletons in your family's closet? If so, what are they?
- In what ways can older family members be helpful when you are researching your ancestry? People who recount their past and tell stories are known as primary sources. Why is this? What is the difference between a primary source and a secondary source?

- How does Isabella's life as a 30-year-old woman living in the late 1880's contrast with the life a woman of her age would lead today? Why would it have been such a scandal when Isabella fell pregnant? How did her family deal with this situation?
- When Daphne picks Stacey up from the bus stop she asks her to "give me a chance". Why is Daphne in such an awkward position? What do you think is the best way for her to approach her partner's daughter?
- Why don't you think Stacey's dad told her about the baby? Why is Stacey so upset by the news? How would you feel in her position?

**Students read Chapters 11- Epilogue (pp. 102-176) independently before the next shared session.**

## **Comprehension Chapters 11 - Epilogue (pp. 102-176)**

- What does Stacey notice about her father's kitchen while she prepares herself breakfast? What does she put in the dishwasher instead of dishwasher detergent?
- What parallels does Stacey draw between Joe Marshall and her father?
- Who died in September 1885?
- Describe Isabella and Joe's life in Napier. What interesting discovery does Stacey make when she reads Isabella's March 13, 1886 entry?
- What additional information does Stacey discover at the National Archives building? Who meets up with her there? Why did he track her down? How does he help Stacey with her search? Why does Stacey find gathering the information so frustrating?
- How do Stacey and Toby figure out when Isabella married Joe?
- Why is Lewis Harper so angry when Stacey returns home? What does Stacey tell her father about her feelings regarding Daphne and the baby? How did Daphne get injured? Why does Stacey's father slap her? Was this action justified? Why/why not?
- Who does Stacey's dad suggest might be able to help her with her research?
- What does Stacey learn about Joe and Isabella from Phyllis? In what ways were the couple a mismatch? What difficulties did they face in their relationship? Why were they forced to flee to New Zealand?
- What possible explanations does Stacey come up with for why Charlotte accompanied Isabella and Joe on their journey?
- Why does Phyllis believe that Isabella was "not easy to love"? How did Joe calm his wife down when she became angry? Why do you think that Stacey is so concerned about whether the couple loved each other or not?
- What happened when Annie and her husband returned to England to look up relatives?
- What does Phyllis give Stacey before she leaves? What is included that captures Stacey's attention?

- What does Stacey discover when she kisses Phyllis goodbye? How does her father react when she confronts him about it? What does Lewis reveal to Stacey about his relationship with her mother during the car ride home?
- What happens for the first time that necessitates Stacey having to ask Daphne for help?
- Describe Stacey's outing with Daphne. In what ways is Stacey making an effort to get to know Daphne? What does she find out about her?
- Who rings Stacey on her last afternoon in Wellington? Why is Stacey so excited by the phone call?
- Why does Stacey suggest to her father that she come and stay in the September holidays?
- Why do you think Stacey chose to present her research in-role as Isabella? What information does she include about the social climate in the 1880's? Why is this information important? Choose 3 aspects of Isabella's life that you find interesting and explain what it is about these aspects that fascinates you.

### Discussion

- Describe Stacey's feelings towards Daphne. Do you believe that Daphne is really responsible for Stacey's parents' break up? Explain your answer. Why is Stacey unable to feel remorse about causing Daphne's accident? What does this suggest about her as a person?
- Phyllis makes the comment "I don't know what's worse; back then, when appearances and social standing counted for everything, or these days when anything- apparently everything- is absolutely socially acceptable". Explain what she means by this. Find examples from the story that back up Phyllis' statement. What is your opinion about this?
- Describe the research process that Stacey went through. What primary sources of information did she use? What secondary sources? Where did she gather her information from? What challenges or difficulties did she face? How did she overcome them? Find examples in the story where Stacey cross-checked information to ensure it was correct.
- Do you think that Stacey's visit to Wellington to see her father was worthwhile? Why/why not? Do you think her relationship with her dad will improve after her visit? Explain your answer.
- What do you think Stacey has learnt about herself from her experiences?

### Activities

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

**Character** – Choose an important scene from the novel where a character acts in a certain way or makes an important decision. Explain the motivations behind the character's action or decision and describe what it shows the reader about the character.

**Research** – Imagine that you have been given the same research assignment as Stacey. Choose an interesting ancestor to complete your research on. Try and interview relatives and use primary and secondary sources of information. Present your research in role as your chosen ancestor. Include information about the social climate during the period that you are researching and explain how this affected your ancestor's life.

**Review** – Complete a book review for *Finding Isabella*. Include a brief plot summary, explain what type of book it is and who you think it will appeal to. Describe the characters, the setting and the author's message. Remember to give your personal opinion about the novel.

**Marking Schedule** – Imagine that you are Stacey's teacher. You are responsible for marking Stacey's oral presentation based on her research. Design a marking schedule that you would use to grade her performance. You may want to include sections on creativity, use of different resources, how the material is structured and delivery techniques.

**Static Image** – Design a static image that depicts a main theme from the novel. You may wish to complete a collage using words and images from the text, a poster or a web page. Remember to combine verbal and visual features to convey your ideas.

**Letter** – Imagine that you are Isabella. Write a letter home to England describing your new life in New Zealand and the challenges that you face coping with a new baby and marriage. Include your thoughts and feelings about what is going on in your life.

**Character** – Complete a character profile for Stacey. Include information about how she develops and changes as the novel progresses and look at the reasons behind these changes. Use evidence from the novel to back up your ideas.