

# Nest of Lies

Author: Heather McQuillan

## Synopsis

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Sixty years ago the Plague destroyed civilisation. The Council has always blamed the birds for spreading the Plague and now Ashlee and the other members of the citadel are terrified of them. There are no birds inside the reclaimed city and Sanctuary Guards control the borders to ensure that they cannot enter.

However, without birds to control the insects and pests, the bugs take over the gardens and become immune to chemical sprays. Food is becoming scarce and Ashlee's father, an elder in the Council, is sent to other ruined cities to find a solution.

While her papa is away Ashlee is left in the care of her stepfamily, who treat her as little better than a slave. One day a yellowhammer bird began tapping at her window and although initially afraid Ashlee soon realises that the bird brings a message of hope from her lost brother Felix who was banished years before. Felix has become a legend, a boy who talks to and flies with the birds. Ashlee is forced to flee the Citadel and take her chances in the outside world. Here she joins others who live free in the wild and meets the Egghead scientists who force her to challenge the truth of everything she has ever been told. Eventually Ashlee is reunited with her brother, but instead of the happy ending that she yearns for tragedy lies ahead. Ashlee must find out the truth about herself, her past and her father.

## Text Type

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*Nest of Lies* is an extremely well-written science fiction adventure. This fast-paced story is written by New Zealand novelist Heather McQuillan, author of *Mind Over Matter* which was the 2005 winner of the Tom Fitzgibbon award. Suitable for girls and boys aged 11+, the novel has broad appeal, particularly for fans of Philip Pulman. Taking place in the future and set in New Zealand the novel is unique in that although time has moved forward, technology and civilisation has regressed. The people who live in the Citadel are carefully controlled by the Council who tell them what to think, say and feel. Books and technologies are banned. By modern standards the conditions in the reclaimed city are primitive.

Students reading the novel will recognise the allusions to well-known fairy stories. References to well-known New Zealand flora and fauna also add an

element of interest. Ashlee is a likeable protagonist who exhibits many positive attributes such as courage and determination. She is forced to leave the Citadel and meets people who cause her to question everything that she has ever been told. Despite the fact that what she learns puts her own father in a very poor light Ashlee is determined to know the truth.

Themes include family, friendship, loyalty, control, the idea that knowledge is power and the prejudice often suffered by those who are considered different.

## Sharing the Novel

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*The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapter 1 (pp. 3-12), Chapters 2-12 (pp. 13-103), Chapters 13-24 (pp. 104-197) and Chapters 25-35 (pp. 198-287).*

*During shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. Have them make inferences and predictions. Students should examine the style in which the novel is written and identify the elements that are particular to the science-fiction genre. Students should become familiar with the main characters in the novel and how these are depicted by the author. Encourage students to examine the motives and actions of Ashlee and study how she develops and changes throughout the novel. Students should identify main ideas and issues raised in the story and wherever possible relate these to their own experiences.*

## 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 *Nest of Lies*?
- Describe the illustration on the front cover. What mood do you think this picture is supposed to convey?
- Why is Ashlee terrified of birds?
- Where does Ashlee live?
- What things are considered a danger to those in the Citadel?
- What kind of novel do you think this is?
- What do you expect from novels of this genre?

**Teacher reads Chapter 1 (pp. 3-12) aloud to class. Students follow along in their own books**

### **Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 3-12)**

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- How does Ashlee react when she thinks she sees a bird? Why does she react like this?
- How is Ashlee treated by her stepfamily? Why do you think they treat her like this?
- Why is Ma Elsie so angry at Ashlee for mentioning the bird?
- What has Ashlee been taught about birds during Sanctuary Service?
- Why does Ashlee decide to follow the bird outside? How does she react when she sees the nest?
- What does Ashlee believe about birds and their songs?

#### **Discussion**

- What do we learn about the setting of the story from this chapter?
- What do you think Ashlee means when she refers to scavenging?
- What famous fairytale does Ashlee's home situation remind you of?
- Describe the society that Ashlee lives in. Can you draw any comparisons to others societies or situations that you a familiar with?
- What do you think Ashlee will do about the bird and the nest that she has discovered?

**Students read Chapters 2-12 (pp. 13-103) independently before the next shared sessions.**

### **Comprehension Chapters 2-12 (pp. 13-103)**

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- What does Ashlee remove from the bird's leg?
- What happened to people who protected birds during the Plague years?
- Why do you think Ashlee decides not to tell anyone about the birds or the nest?
- Who is Felix? Why was he taken away? Why is Ashlee so surprised by what is written in the note? What does Ashlee think that Felix wants her to do?
- How did Ashlee and her family end up in the Citadel?
- What happens to make Ma Elsie angry with Ashlee? What does she tell Ashlee she has to do to fix the door?
- How does Ashlee know where to find mesh?
- How does Ashlee feel about scavenging?

- How did the people who were not allowed in the Sanctuary die? How did Ashlee's Papa justify this to her?
- Who is John? How does Ashlee behave around him?
- What does John feel like he has lost? Why is Ashlee nervous about the conversation that she has with John?
- Why were people forbidden to eat eels? How did Ashlee's Papa deal with the eel problem? How did Ashlee's mum react when she heard what her husband had done? Why did Ashlee's Papa feel that her mother brought shame on him?
- What measures did the Sanctuary Guard put in place under Papa's leadership? Why do you think that such measures were considered necessary?
- What do you think the counsel consider "Temptations"?
- What does Ashlee find out about Katriona's life when she reads her diary? What happened to Katriona?
- Why is the girl hiding in the house? What happened to her family? How does she react when she learns that Ashlee's Papa is the Big Man?
- What happened to Ashlee's mother?
- Why did the Grand Father consider Ma Elsie to be a good Sanctuary wife?
- How did Papa deal with the Plague of the Bugs?
- Why did Ashlee believe that Felix was dead?
- How do Lilah and Marleen behave when they find the satin slippers?
- Who are Ika and Old Nate? Where do they live? Why are they tolerated by those who live in the Citadel?
- What does Ashlee learn from her father's letter?
- What is the Choosing Ceremony? Why doesn't Elsie want Ashlee to take part? Who has their sights set on Ashlee?
- What does Felix ask Ashlee to do in the second note?
- Why are the seed packages so important to Ashlee?
- Why does Ashlee decide that she must leave the Citadel?
- Why is the journey to Ma Malcho's house dangerous for Ashlee? Why do you think Ma Malcho looks out for Ashlee? What exciting gossip does Ma Malcho share with Ashlee?
- Who are the Eggheads? Who are the Outsiders?
- Why does John think that Ashlee is more like her mother than her father? Why does he direct her to the coast? How does Ashlee react to his words?
- What is wrong with Bretty's feet? Why does Ashlee believe that Lilah and Marleen don't know about his condition? Why does Ashlee keep his secret?
- How does Ashlee prepare for her trip?
- Why do the alarms go off?

- What does Ashlee learn from Maureen when they argue? Why does Ashlee tie Maureen up before she leaves?
- Why does Ashlee ask Hans to call around the following day?
- How does Maureen escape and what does she do when she leaves the house?
- Who comes to warn Ashlee that she needs to get away? Why do you think he does this?
- Who finds Ashlee in the bush? Which way does he insist that they go? Why does he suggest they take the cart with them?
- How does Ashlee feel when she finds herself inside the tunnel? Why does Ika suggest that he and Ashlee complete the journey in the dark? What do you think Ashlee sees when she lights the match?

### Discussion

- What evidence is there in the story to suggest that the story is set in New Zealand?
- What is a Discard? How are Discards treated by others? Why do you think people are prejudiced towards others who are different? What parallels can you draw between the Discards and others groups in history who have been discriminated against?
- Who are the chosen ones? Who do you think decided who would be saved and who wouldn't?
- What do you think John means when he says "Of course, as your father's daughter, you must walk the talk"? What is free will and why is it important?
- How does life after the Plague differ from life before the Plague?
- Why do you think the people who live in the Citadel are forbidden to read by the council?
- What do you think Ashlee's father will do if he finds out the secret that Elsie is hiding from him about Bretty?

*Students read Chapters 13-24 (pp. 104-198) independently before the next shared session.*

### Comprehension Chapters 13-24 (pp. 104-198)

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- Who do the bones belong to? How does Ika know about them?
- Who does Ika believe will pick them up in a boat? How does Ika know how to signal them? Why does Ashlee feel apprehensive about this plan?

- What information does Ika give Ashlee about Felix? Why do you think Jaspa left Felix alive? How does he convince Elsie that he did the deed? Why do the Council want Felix dead?
- How does Whaleman react when he realises who Ashlee is?
- What does Ika tell Ashlee about Nate that upsets her? How does Whaleman feel about Ashlee's Papa?
- Describe the cabin that Whaleman takes Ika and Ashlee to. How does it differ from Ashlee's house in the Citadel?
- Why are Mynah and Whaleman certain that the messages came from Felix?
- Why does Ashlee feel like she can't trust Mynah and Whaleman?
- Why do Ika and Ashlee have to leave the cabin quickly?
- What is the *Albatross*? Why does Ika think that the Sanctuary guards know about the boat? How might this create problems for the runaways?
- What appears in the water while the group is waiting for the boat?
- What has Ashlee been taught about humans and animals? Why does she argue with Whaleman? Why does Whaleman believe that humans, not animals are the plague of the earth?
- What does Ashlee learn about the plague from Mynah?
- What does the Sanctuary Guard threaten Whaleman and Mynah with if they don't hand over Ashlee? Why do you think they choose not to?
- Who gets injured in the shoot out?
- Why is Ashlee surprised when she sees *Albatross*?
- How does *Albatross* get its electricity?
- How does Raven feel about having Ashlee aboard?
- What bad things has Ashlee been told about Scientists by the Council?
- What wonders do Ika and Ashlee discover aboard *Albatross*?
- Why are Ika and Ashlee summoned to the table with the Scientists? What information does Ashlee reveal to them?
- What happened at Munx? How does Ika react to this news?
- What does Raven believe will happen if Ashlee's Papa sprays for bugs?
- What is "selective culling"? What does Quail tell Ashlee her father does with "Discards"?
- What does Martin reveal to Ashlee about Ika? Who was Robin? What happened to her?
- What change does Ashlee notice in Ika in the morning? How does Ashlee convince Ika to stay with her? Why is Ika concerned that they might not be let off the ship?
- What does Mynah request that Ika and Ashlee be allowed to do? Why isn't Ika allowed to go?
- How does Ashlee feel when the others strip off their clothes and go for a swim? Why does she feel like this?

- What does Ashlee observe Magpie doing during the night? What do you think the significance of this might be?
- What does Mynah mean when she says "Already we have lost so much knowledge"?
- Why is Ika so excited when Ashlee returns to the ship?
- What information is contained in the note from Felix? Who does Raven decide should accompany Ashlee on her journey? Why doesn't she want Magpie to go?
- Why is Ika worried about Ashlee revealing information to people she doesn't know?

### Discussion

- What "scientific objects" do we take for granted that Ashlee has no knowledge of? What modern device or convenience do you think you would miss the most if you lived in Ashlee's world?
- What fairy story does the tale that Ika tells Ashlee about Felix remind you of and why?
- What does Ashlee learn about her society and the Sanctuary guards that is at odds with what she has been led to believe? How do you think this knowledge will affect her?
- Why does Ashlee think that Whaleman and Mynah are cold and calculating? What skills and attributes do you think they would require to survive as Outsiders?
- What environmental issues are raised in the novel?
- Why is it important to always ask questions?
- Why do you think the various groups who live outside the Sanctuary are so suspicious of each other? What would happen if they banded together?
- Predict what will happen next in the story.

***Students read Chapters 25-35 (pp. 198-287) independently before the next shared session.***

### **Comprehension Chapters 25-35 (pp. 198-287)**

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- Why does Ashlee send Ika back to *Albatross* before she meets Felix?
- Describe Ashlee's first sighting of her brother. How does she feel when he takes her flying? Why does Felix decide that this will be his last flight in the valley?

- Who is Francis? What is her story? Where did Francis find Felix? What do you think might have happened to Felix if he hadn't been found by Francis? What did Francis do for Felix when she became ill?
- Why is Felix determined to bury Francis rather than cremate her?
- How did Felix learn how to fly?
- How does Felix react when Ashlee gives him the letter from Raven?
- Who does Felix send messages to before he and Ashlee leave the valley? Who do Ashlee and Felix meet on the jetty? In what way do the others look at Felix? Why does this worry Ashlee?
- How does Felix prepare the Scientists and Sanctuary for their mission? In what way does Ashlee help? What role is Martin being schooled to play? What two plans have the Scientists devised to stop the chemical drop? What is the back up plan?
- What part is Ashlee asked to play in the plan? Why does Ashlee feel obligated to help?
- Who tries to get Ashlee to give him details of the plan? Why is she reluctant to tell him anything?
- What news arrives about Whaleman?
- Who goes with Felix in his flying group?
- Who does Ashlee think that Magpie is spying for? Why does Ashlee worry that they are walking into a trap?
- Why do you think the mission pulls together different groups such as Scientists, Fisherfolk and Survivors?
- How do Quail and Ashlee get into the Citadel? How does Ashlee feel about being back there? Why does Ashlee think that something is wrong?
- What realisation does Felix come to when he sees the balloons lighting up?
- What difficulties do the flyers face while trying to attack the balloons? How does Ika take down his balloon? Why does he make this sacrifice? How do the birds' aid the attackers?
- Where do Ashlee and Martin go when they get inside the Temple? How do they get past the guards? What are they trying to achieve?
- What happens when the balloon reaches the *Albatross*? How do some of the crew survive the attack? How do the men in the balloon react when they see the birds?
- Why does Raven decide that the *Albatross* must leave immediately?
- Why does Martin tell Ashlee to go and hide? How does Ashlee end up in the Choosing ceremony? Who recognises Ashlee during the ceremony? Who does Ashlee see sitting next to the Grand Father?
- What announcement does Papa make to the crowd? Why do some people think that Martin is the voice of God? What messages does he give the crowds?

- Who exposes Ashlee to the crowd? How does Papa react when he sees his daughter?
- What effect does Martin's speech have on the families that heard it?
- How did Papa know where the *Albatross* would be? How does he feel about Ashlee and Felix?
- Who else has been captured? What advice does Whaleman give Ashlee?
- Who arrives to watch Ashlee's demise? How does Ashlee give away Bretty's secret? What does Papa do when he realises Bretty has a deformity? Who rescues Bretty? Why do you think she does this?
- How do the prisoners escape?
- What happens to Lilah? Is this punishment justified? Why/why not?
- Why does the group decide to trust Magpie and the Grand Father? Where does Felix think they should go? Why does Elsie decide to return to Sanctuary?
- How many people decide to follow Felix to a new home?

### Discussion

- How does Ashlee develop and change during the story? What lessons do you think she learns?
- Identify the climax of the novel. Why is this event important?
- Identify an important idea or theme from the story. How is this theme developed by the author?
- Describe the setting of the novel. How does the setting influence the action?
- Identify an important symbol in the story.

### Activities

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**Static Image** - Design a propaganda poster for the Sanctuary.

**Diary** - Imagine you are Ashlee. Write a diary entry for the day that you meet Felix, describing your experiences and your thoughts and feelings about being reunited with your long lost brother.

**Issue** - Identify an important issue that is raised in this story. Explain the issue and give your opinion about it.

**Plot** - design a flow diagram that identifies at least 10 important events in the story.

**Static Image** - Design a static image that depicts one of the important themes presented in the story. You may wish to do a collage, use the computer or design a poster. Use words and images from the story to convey your idea.

**Character** - Describe Ashlee's actions and behaviour in a particular situation that occurs in the story. Justify or criticise her motives in this situation.

**Questions** - Write 10 discussion questions for the novel.

**Drama** - Choose an exciting event from the story and write a script for it. Include a list of characters and stage directions. Practise your play and present it to your class.

**Soundtrack** - Imagine that this novel is being made into a film. Choose 5 songs for the soundtrack. Explain why you chose the songs and where in the film they will go.

*Notes written by Vicki Ladd*