

Flashpoint

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Synopsis

Charlotte has turned 16-years-old and her life is perfect, or so it seems. She has good looks, a loving family, a flash house and a hot new boyfriend called Mark. But the day after Charlotte's birthday her life explodes. She arrives home to find her mother crying and distraught. Her father has left, just like that, and Charlotte's life changes in an instant.

Despite her father's assurances that there is no one else, Charlotte soon discovers that this is a lie. Her name is Claudia. She's a lawyer, young and pretty. And worst of all she's pregnant. Charlotte's mother, who has devoted her whole life to her family and her husband, falls apart. She has not worked for years and doesn't have any interests outside the home. Charlotte is forced to take on the role of caregiver to her mother. She offers her a shoulder to cry on, takes over the running of the household and tries to encourage her mother to get her life together.

Charlotte's mum slowly begins to get back on her feet. She begins a relationship with Dean, a real estate agent. And to the immense embarrassment of her teenage children, seems intent on recapturing her youth by wearing short skirts and drinking too much. She finds a job as a waitress and buys a much smaller house for herself and her children. As time goes on it becomes clear to Charlotte that her parents are not going to get back together. Her life has changed dramatically and the stress begins to get to her. Charlotte needs to be strong for her family but she is, after all, only a teenager. When is somebody going to look after her?

Text Type

Flashpoint is a gritty and realistic novel that tells the story of Charlotte's parents' break-up. Divorce is an extremely topical issue that many readers will be able to relate to. The novel is aimed at a teenage audience and would appeal particularly to girls. The story is set in New Zealand. The novel is told from Charlotte's point of view and through her eyes the reader learns of the pain and anguish that she suffers when everything she believed to be true suddenly turns out to be a lie. Charlotte is an utterly believable character whose actions and reactions to her situation are credible.

Charlotte is only 16 years-old when her father leaves her mother but is forced to take on the responsibilities of an adult when her mother falls apart. She is angry at her father for his betrayal, but she is also angry and resentful towards her mother because she is so wrapped up in her own grief that she is unable to support her children through this difficult time. Charlotte's friend April is

sympathetic and offers Charlotte support, but between having a mother at home who is acting like a teenager, trying to build a relationship with Mark and under increasing pressure from her father to accept Claudia, Charlotte cracks under the pressure. She begins drinking in secret to numb the pain. Luckily Charlotte's drinking is discovered before it becomes a real problem and the discovery of her drinking compels her mother to resume her parental responsibilities.

Charlotte's character develops and changes throughout the course of the novel. She reaches an understanding about her parents and is able to view their relationship with each other and their new partners with a mature objectivity that belies her years. Charlotte learns acceptance and by the end of the story she understands that change is inevitable and while she may not choose it, or control it – for her own piece of mind and happiness, she must learn to live with it.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 5-14), Chapters 3-13 (pp. 15-95) and Chapters 14-26 (pp. 96-176).

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas raised in the novel. They should understand inferences and make predictions. Encourage them to relate Charlotte's experience to their own lives and broader knowledge. Have them track the journey that Charlotte makes in the novel as she moves from stunned disbelief, to anger and finally to acceptance of the situation. Students should be able to identify important themes and ideas raised in the novel and explain how they are developed by the author.

Introducing the Novel

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

- ∞ Who is pictured on the front cover of the novel? Describe her facial expression. Why do you think she looks like this? Why do you think the cover illustration is in shades of black and white? What sort of tone does this create? How does this match the picture?
- ∞ Why do you think the novel is called *Flashpoint*?
- ∞ How old is Charlotte? Why is her life so good?
- ∞ What do you think happens that blows Charlotte's family apart?

Teacher reads Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 5-14) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 5-14)

- ∞ How do you know that Charlotte is talking in retrospect in Chapter 1?
- ∞ How old is Charlotte? Who is present at her birthday party?

- ∞ What do we learn about Charlotte's parents in Chapter 1? How do they relate to each other?
- ∞ What does Charlotte mean when she says her mum "seemed proud that she was doing everything for us"?
- ∞ Describe Charlotte's house. What clues are there in Chapter 1 to suggest her family is well-off?
- ∞ What does Charlotte think has happened when she finds her mother crying in the kitchen? What news does her mother give her? How does Charlotte react to the bombshell?
- ∞ Why is Charlotte's mum initially reluctant to ring Maria?
- ∞ Why is Judy so shocked by what has happened?
- ∞ How does James react to the news of his father's departure?
- ∞ Why do you think everyone is so convinced that Bob will come home?

Discussion

- ∞ Everyone's first thought when they learn that Bob has left is that he has found someone else. Why do you think this is? Do you think that there is another woman involved? Why/why not? Why would Bob lie about this?
- ∞ In what ways will her father's departure change Charlotte's life?
- ∞ Judy has always devoted herself entirely to her family. How do you think she will cope without her husband?
- ∞ Predict what is going to happen next in the story.

Students read Chapters 3-13 (pp. 15-95) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 3-13 (pp. 15-95)

- ∞ Why doesn't Charlotte tell April what has happened? How does she choose to express her feelings?
- ∞ Describe Charlotte's visit to see her father. Why does she feel so angry with him? Do you believe that Bob is being honest with Charlotte? Why/why not?
- ∞ Why is Charlotte's mum feeling so much better when Charlotte arrives home from her father's office? What explanation has she come up with to explain Bob's behaviour? Why is Judy willing to forgive Bob if he has a fling with someone? Why does this upset Charlotte so much?
- ∞ Who does Charlotte see when she walks into the movies with Mark? What is he doing?
- ∞ Why does Charlotte believe that Nick is aware of her father's affair? How does her mother react when Charlotte tells her what she saw?
- ∞ How long has Charlotte's dad been having an affair? Why do you think he lied about it to his family? How does Charlotte feel about her father at this point?
- ∞ Describe Judy's reaction to Bob's confession about the affair. Why do you think she reacts like this? What does Bob tell Judy that finally makes her realise that their marriage might be over?

- ∞ How does Charlotte attempt to comfort her mother after her father gives the devastating news? What does Judy mean when she says “How can I be, without your father”?
- ∞ How does James deal with his parents’ break-up? How does his attitude make things harder for Charlotte?
- ∞ How does Charlotte feel about her father’s new partner?
- ∞ Why does Judy come and find Charlotte at school? Why is Charlotte so embarrassed about this? Who is the letter from? What does Bob want done with the house?
- ∞ Charlotte believes that her mother is being uncaring and is only interested in herself. Is this a fair assessment of her mother’s behaviour? Why/why not? Do you believe that Charlotte should be more sympathetic towards her mother? Explain your answer.
- ∞ How does Charlotte feel about her father’s decision to sell the house?
- ∞ How does being with Mark help Charlotte forget her troubles? How does Mark make her feel?
- ∞ Why isn’t there any food in the house?
- ∞ Why doesn’t James care about where the family ends up living? Why do you think James refuses to share his feelings with Charlotte? How does his silence make Charlotte feel?
- ∞ How does James react when he learns that his father has invited him over for lunch? Why does Charlotte agree to go? What is her mother’s initial reaction to this? How does Charlotte get her to change her mind?
- ∞ How does Judy behave around Dean, the real estate agent?
- ∞ Describe the house that Charlotte, James and their mother go to look at. What does Charlotte like about it? What doesn’t she like?
- ∞ Why does Charlotte feel like her mother has changed into “a different, horrible person”? What does she say to James that elicits a reaction out of him? Why does Charlotte cancel on Mark so that she can have fish and chips with James?
- ∞ Why does Charlotte like April’s parents so much? In what ways do they try and support Charlotte?
- ∞ Why does Charlotte want April to accompany her to her father’s apartment? Why doesn’t she tell her father that her friend is coming?
- ∞ Describe the apartment where Bob is living.
- ∞ Describe what Claudia looks like. What does she do for a job?
- ∞ How do April and Charlotte try and make Claudia feel uncomfortable when Bob goes to get the drinks? Why does Claudia feel that her dad’s behaviour during the visit is “rude and insensitive”? Do you agree with her? Why/why not?
- ∞ How does Bob react when he learns that Judy has put an offer in on a house? Why do you think he reacts like this?
- ∞ Why do Charlotte and April believe that it won’t last between Bob and Claudia?

Discussion

- ∞ How does Judy behave in the days immediately following Bob’s announcement? Why does Charlotte wonder about her sanity? In what

- ways does Judy behave like a child and Charlotte like an adult during this time? Why do you think this role-reversal takes place?
- ∞ A marriage break-up is always hard but it is particularly difficult for Charlotte's mother. Why is this? How does Judy's life change after Bob leaves? Why isn't she in a position to support her children during this upheaval?
 - ∞ Explain how Bob behaves during this difficult time. Do you believe he deals with the situation well? Why/why not? What could he have done differently that might have made things easier for Judy and his children?
 - ∞ Why does it take so long for Charlotte to tell April about her parents' break-up? In what ways is April a good friend to Charlotte once she learns what she is going through? Why is it so important to have someone to talk to and confide in when you are going through a hard time?
 - ∞ Why do you think Judy starts seeing Dean so soon after her marriage break-up?
 - ∞ What evidence is there to suggest that Charlotte is suffering from stress?
 - ∞ Predict what is going to happen in the story next.

Students read Chapters 14-26 (pp. 96-176) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 14-26 (pp. 96-176)

- ∞ Why did Bob ring Judy about the house? Why is Judy so stunned by what he told her?
- ∞ How much money will Judy get from the sale of the house? Why is Judy so surprised when she learns that Bob has debts?
- ∞ How does Charlotte feel when the couple comes over to measure up the house?
- ∞ Do you think April's right when she says that Charlotte's parents will get back together? Why/why not?
- ∞ Why does Charlotte feel ashamed of her mother? Why does she call Dean "Creepy Dean"? How does she feel when she realises that he stayed the night?
- ∞ Why does Bob turn up at the house unexpectedly? Why does Judy tell him that he should have knocked? What is the outcome of his visit?
- ∞ Describe the second house that Charlotte, James and Judy go and see. How does Charlotte feel about this house?
- ∞ Why doesn't Charlotte enjoy the party that she goes to with Mark? What makes her rebuke Mark's advances?
- ∞ What will Judy use for money before she gets a job?
- ∞ How does moving houses affect Charlotte? What does she mean when she says "I hadn't realised that my home sort of defined me as a person". Why does Charlotte feel better having James there even though he is uncommunicative?



- ∞ Where does Judy get a job? How does securing a job make her feel about herself? What hours will she be working?
- ∞ What shocking confession does Judy make about Dean?
- ∞ Why does Charlotte drink wine at night? Why does she feel lonely a lot of the time?
- ∞ Why is Charlotte's coffee date with her father so awkward?
- ∞ Why do James and Charlotte decide to have a party? How does Charlotte know that she has had too much to drink? Why doesn't she want James to tell her mother? Why does his reaction towards her behaviour surprise her?
- ∞ Describe the conversation that Charlotte has with her mother about her drinking. Why does Charlotte drink? What does Judy explain to her daughter about her own drinking? What positives do you think will come out of this conversation?
- ∞ What happens to Billie? How does Billie's death affect the family? What part does Bob play in the proceedings? How does Billie's death help reunite the family?
- ∞ What realisation does Judy come to after Billie's funeral? Why do you think she is so accepting of the situation?
- ∞ Why does Mark break up with Charlotte? How does Charlotte feel about Mark after this? In what ways does Mark's betrayal affect Charlotte's confidence?
- ∞ Why does James refuse to get together with Claudia and Bob? What does Charlotte say to her father during her outburst? Do you agree that Bob is insensitive to his children's feelings? Why/why not?
- ∞ What does Charlotte learn from her father about his relationship with Claudia when she visits his office? Why do you think Charlotte wants to know all the details about what happened? Why do adults so often feel that children shouldn't be given all the information about things like relationships and finances?
- ∞ Why is Charlotte so upset by the fact that her father and Claudia seem happy together?
- ∞ Who is John? Why does everyone like him so much? What does John give Judy a job doing? What does Charlotte find out about John's background when she asks her mother about him?
- ∞ What changes occur in Charlotte's life that help her feel happy and content?
- ∞ Why doesn't Judy want to rush into anything with John? How is Judy's relationship with John different to her relationship with Bob?
- ∞ Why does Judy rush to the hospital when Bob calls? What does this suggest about her character?
- ∞ Why does Charlotte believe that it is a good thing for Judy that Bob left her? Why do you think Charlotte and James are happy for their mother and accept John, but not Claudia?
- ∞ What do Claudia and Bob call their baby? Why do you think Judy talks Charlotte and James into going to visit their half-sister? How does Charlotte react when she sees the baby?
- ∞ Why do you think Judy agrees to look after the baby so that Bob can take Claudia out?

- ∞ How is Charlotte's 17th birthday different to her 16th? Why does Charlotte believe that Claudia is good for her father? What does Charlotte say that suggests she is beginning to accept Claudia?

Discussion

- ∞ Charlotte's dad is really insistent that his children get to know Claudia and give her a chance. Why is this? Why are James and Charlotte initially reluctant to get to know Claudia? Are they being unreasonable? Why/why not? Do you believe that Claudia is responsible for Charlotte's parents' break-up? Explain your answer. Why is it so important to give people time to adjust to a new situation?
- ∞ Judy uses alcohol as a way of dealing with her marriage break-up and Charlotte also uses alcohol to help her cope with loneliness and stress. Why do so many people turn to alcohol and drugs when they face a problem? What is it about alcohol that appeals to them? Can alcohol really help you deal with a problem? Why/why not?
- ∞ Judy is initially devastated by her husband's departure. What lessons does she learn from her marriage break-up? What new skills is she forced to learn? How does she change as a person? Find examples in the story that illustrate how Judy has become more self-sufficient.
- ∞ Identify a main theme in the novel and explain how it is developed by the author.

Activities

Agony Aunt – Imagine that you are Charlotte and write a letter to an agony aunt. Your letter should detail the problems that you are having at home and how you feel about them. Next adopt the role of agony aunt. Write a reply to Charlotte's letter offering her advice on her problems.

Static Image – Design a poster advertising *Flashpoint* that could be displayed in your school library.

Writing – Rewrite a chapter from the novel from James' point of view.

Review – Write a book review for *Flashpoint*. Include a brief plot summary and information about the characters. Comment on the themes that are presented by the author. Remember to include your personal opinion about the book and explain why you would or wouldn't recommend it to others to read.

Character – Write several paragraphs about Judy. Describe what she is like at the start of the novel and how she reacts to her husband's departure. Track how she develops and changes throughout the course of the book and explain, with close reference to the text, the reason behind these changes. In what ways has her marriage break-up been a positive thing for Judy?

Reading – Find another novel that deals with the issue of divorce and its affects on children. Compare and contrast how both novels deal with the issue of divorce.

Letter Writing – Imagine that you are Charlotte and have just seen your father at the movies with another woman. Write him a letter telling him how you feel about the fact that he left your mother and that he lied to you about the reason.

Character – Choose 3 characters from the novel. For each write 5 questions to ask them and then answer each question as if you were that character. Your questions should help reveal your chosen characters by looking at their actions, reactions, motivations and feelings.

Poem – Write a poem based on the novel.

Poster – Design a poster that illustrates the dangers of using alcohol to deal with stress.