

**Text title:** *Seal Boy***Author:** Ken Catran*(Random House)*

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**Synopsis**

Emmet J. Tyler junior is a rich young man being raised by his grandfather, one of Boston's merchant elite. His life is one of privilege and opportunity. That is until he is kidnapped by the rogue Silas Cramp, and sold to work on a whaling boat. Under the leadership of Captain Bracegirdle, Emmet learns many lessons aboard *Absalom* and begins to question the values that he held in his former life. He works hard and earns the respect of his fellow sailors. What Emmet doesn't know is that his grandfather is looking for him. Anyone who can return him home to Boston will earn \$500 in gold pieces – whether he is dead or alive.

Discovering who Emmet really is, Bracegirdle takes him ashore in New Zealand to the infamous whaling town of Kororareka. There he intends to organise a safe passage home for Emmet. However, before this occurs Kororareka is attacked by a Maori war party. Emmet escapes the chaos on the sealing vessel the *Betsy Bright*. Sealers are notoriously known for being fearsome and untrustworthy. It does not take Emmet long to realise that Captain Blessed knows about the reward and he begins to fear for his life. When the party arrives ashore Emmet seizes the opportunity to escape. Soon he finds himself alone on the island and he must develop new skills and strengths to survive. Being aboard a whaling ship and a sealing vessel has heightened Emmet's awareness of the plight of these beautiful creatures and he takes it upon himself to protect the seals on the Island. He is willing to risk everything to protect the seals. His very life is put at risk when Captain Blessed returns to the Island, searching for his bounty.

**Text Type**

*Seal Boy* is an historical novel set in the 1840's. Emmet's journey takes him from Boston to Australia, New Zealand and the Chatam Islands. The novel is fascinating in its accurate description of life on a whaling boat and the process of capturing a whale. This novel would appeal to all readers but particularly to boys aged 10+. The story is a fast-paced adventure. The character of Emmet develops and changes as the story progresses. The reader sees him evolve from a spoilt and pretentious "master" to a down-to earth, hardworking sailor who earns the respect of others. Emmet begins to question the values that he has grown up with. He no longer takes things for granted. He has seen the suffering man inflicts on these beautiful creatures and he decides to try and protect them. *Seal Boy* is a journey of self-discovery. Themes include growing up, animal conservation, strength and courage and fighting for what you believe in.

### Sharing the Novel

The novel can be covered in 4 shared sessions and 3 independent reading sessions. It has been divided up as follows: Chapters 1-2 (pp. 7-18), Chapters 3-8 (pp. 19-64), Chapters 9-14 (pp. 65-110), Chapters 15-21 (pp. 111-167). During the shared sessions encourage students to discuss the setting of the novel and the effect that this has on the story.

Encourage them to track the character development of Emmet and describe the reasons for change. Have them identify important themes and ideas.

### Introducing the text

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

- Who do you think *Seal Boy* is? Why do you think he is called this?
- When and where is the story set?
- What does Emmet “see of life” during his adventures?
- What kind of life-or-death decisions do you think Emmet might have to make?
- Devise 3 questions that you would like answered about the book. Complete the answers to these questions as you read.

Teacher reads Chapters 1-2 aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

### Comprehension Chapters 1-2

- Where and when is the story set?
- Who are the main characters? What do we know about them so far?
- Describe the dock as Emmet sees it.
- What does grandfather consider to be the “scent of wealth”?
- What is Emmet’s attitude towards Horace?
- Why does Emmet sneak away from the carriage? What do the four street urchins do to him? Why does Emmet knock on the door?
- Name the man who takes Emmet in. Why is Emmet uneasy with him? What 3 mistakes does Emmet make?

### Discussion

- Describe what you know about Emmet’s life. What sort of person do you think he is and why?
- How does Emmet’s life contrast with that of the street urchins who attack him? Why do you think they treat him with such contempt?
- Make a prediction about what will happen to Emmet next.

Students read Chapters 3-8 (pp. 19-64) independently before the next shared session.

### Comprehension Chapters 3-8 (pp. 19-64)

- Where does Emmet wake up? Describe the conditions that he finds himself in.
- Who does Captain Bracegirdle believe that Emmet is? How long is Emmet expected to remain aboard the ship? What kind of ship is it? What is the name of the ship?

- Who are some of the other men aboard the ship?
- Why is Emmet so determined to climb the rigging in bad weather? Who rescues him when he nearly falls? Why doesn't Emmet thank him?
- What are "sea-legs"?
- Who "hazes" Emmet? Why don't the other men intervene? How does Emmet finally get the hazing to stop?
- What does Emmet grow to enjoy about life aboard *Absalom*? Why does he believe that aboard *Absalom* he is somebody?
- Name the Islands that Ben is afraid of. What does he believe happens there?
- How do the crew aboard *Absalom* react when they see the canoe approaching? Why do they react like this? Who boards the *Absalom*?
- Describe Emmet's experience helping to catch the whale. What dangers does this entail? Why does Emmet feel a "tinge of regret"?
- Explain what happens when the whale is caught.
- How does Emmet save Patu's life?

### Discussion

- Describe the difficulties that Emmet has when he first begins work on *Absalom*. How does he overcome these problems?
- In what ways does working on *Absalom* change Emmet. What brings about these changes?
- Do you believe that it is fair for human beings to kill whales so they can produce oil? Explain your answer.
- Predict what is going to happen to Emmet next.

Students read Chapters 9-14 (pp. 65-110) independently before the next shared session.

### Comprehension Chapters 9-14 (pp. 65-110)

- Why does Emmet believe that this new life is "taking hold"?
- What does Patu show Emmet? What is the significance of the object?
- What makes Emmet decide that the killing of whales has to stop?
- Why is it so important for *Absalom* to dock at Kororareka? Why are the men so excited about stopping there?
- Why does Bracegirdle want to see Emmet? What does the way he handles the situation tell us about his character? Why has Emmet's grandfather made a mistake?
- What does Patu say to Emmet about Kororareka before he jumps into the canoe?
- How do the whalers feel about the sealers? Why do they feel this way?
- Describe the scene at Kororareka when Emmet arrives ashore.
- Why is Consul Edgerton preparing to leave Kororareka? What happens to Emmet in the chaos that ensues? Why is he allowed to live?
- What is the name of the sealing ship? Who is the Captain? What is Emmet's impression of him?
- Why do you think the Captain quickly covers Emmet's grandfather's handbill?

- How many skins did the sealers left behind on the Island have? Why is Captain Blessed so unhappy with them? What does he decide to do with the men?
- Why is Emmet suspicious about being asked to join the shore party? Why is he curious about the salt? What do you think it is for?
- Describe the seals that Emmet sees. How does he feel about them?
- How long is Emmet being left on the Island? What do Abbot and Hobbs say to Emmet about the Moriori? What does Wilke say about them?
- Why does Emmet run away from camp? What does he feel he has a responsibility to do? Why does Emmet refuse to leave the Island with the Moriori?
- What does Emmet overhear Hobbs and Abbott talking about?

### Discussion

- Patu was kidnapped and taken to England. Why was he unhappy about this? Some colonists used to kidnap young natives and use them as slave labour. What is your opinion about this practise? Can you think of other examples in history where this has happened? How do Emmet's feelings about dealing with the "benighted pagans" change?
- In what ways could Emmet stop the killing of the whales? Make a list/brainstorm as many ideas as you can, even if they seem difficult or impossible.
- Is it possible for one person to make a difference? Why/why not?
- Describe Emmet's feelings when he was forced to leave *Absalom*. Do you think he will fit easily back into his own life? Explain your answer.
- What qualities and attributes does Emmet possess? How does he display these?
- Predict what will happen to Emmet next.

Students read Chapters 15-21 (pp. 111-167) independently before the next shared session.

### Comprehension Chapters 15-21 (pp. 111-167)

- What does Emmet realise about Blessed? Why isn't he afraid?
- How does Emmet make it hard for the party to hunt seals?
- How does Emmet find the cove? What does he discover there?
- Who sees Emmet hiding? Why doesn't he turn him in?
- What does Emmet call the bull seal?
- Why does Emmet believe that he has "so much to learn"?
- Why does Emmet believe that Captain Blessed will not spend too much time on the Island? What motivates him to harass the sailors still ashore?
- How does Emmet develop a relationship with the seals? How does he feel towards them?
- How does Emmet thwart Captain Cornelius' party? What does he do to Captain Milligan's crew? How does Emmet stop Hans Blucher?
- Who is Maluu? Why doesn't he expose Emmet?
- How is Emmet knocked unconscious? What horrible discovery does he make when he wakes up?

- Who is the Captain of the Philomena? Why does he believe that Emmet “had it coming”?
- Describe Emmet’s winter on the Island. Who helps him survive the harsh conditions?
- Why is Emmet so positive that Blessed will return to the Island? Why is he looking forward to seeing Blessed again?
- How does Emmet escape from Blessed’s men?
- How does Sedgewick track Emmet to the Island?

### Discussion

- What dangers and challenges does Emmet face on the Island? How does he deal with them? How do you think you would feel in his position? How would you cope with the situation?
- Explain Emmet’s feelings towards the seals. How does his attitude differ from that of Captain Watlington’s? How does Watlington justify what he does to Emmet? Does he have a valid point? Explain your answer.
- What is the “different understanding of life” that Emmet develops?

### Activities

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**Plot** – Draw a flow diagram detailing the main events that occur in the novel.

**Research** – Conduct a research assignment about whaling practises during the 1800’s. Formulate four focussing questions. Use a range of sources to gather your information. Present your findings on a poster.

**Persuasive Writing** – Conduct research about whaling practises today and write a persuasive report to argue either for or against the following statement:

*All whaling should be made legal so that people can kill whales for whatever they need.*

**Book Cover** – Design a new book cover for *Seal Boy*. Remember to include a blurb on the back cover. Write a paragraph explaining why your book cover is effective at encouraging people to read the book.

**Writing** – Imagine that you are Emmet. Write a diary entry for a day on the Island. Remember to include details about what you do and your thoughts and feelings.

Or, write a letter to Grandfather from the *Absalom*.

**Character** – Write a paragraph that explains how Emmet’s character changes and develops throughout the course of the story.

**News Article** – Write a newspaper article about Emmet’s rescue from the Island. Remember to use the inverted pyramid style of writing and include quotes from people involved.

**Play** – Choose an exciting section of the book and write a script for it. Practise your play and present it to the rest of the class. Ask classmates to be actors in your play if you need additional characters.

**Debate** – Organise a class debate on the topic “using animal products- human need or human greed”?