

Enemy at the Gate

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Synopsis

The year is 1936. Tom lives with his mother, father, three sisters and younger brother in Wellington. He has an ordinary sort of life - he enjoys hanging out with his best friend Charlie, going to the pictures and, most of all, running. Tom dreams of winning an Olympic gold medal like his hero, Jack Lovelock. He is committed to his goal and trains whenever he gets the chance.

Tom's life suddenly changes when the deadly disease infantile paralysis breaks out in Wellington. Everyone is gripped with fear because polio is an awful disease that can cripple its victims, or even kill them. Schools close and any sort of gathering involving young people is banned. Tom and his sisters are no longer allowed to go to the movies and even seeing their friends is dangerous. Tom is lonely and bored. His life becomes even worse when his sister Flo contracts polio. She is extremely ill and taken away to hospital where only her parents are allowed to visit her. Separated from his sister for months Tom becomes despondent. Being quarantined is like being in prison. Nobody can visit him and he can only run when everyone else is at school. Will Tom's life ever improve? His only hope is that the coming cold weather will stop the polio epidemic as everyone predicts. But what if this doesn't happen?

Text Type

Enemy at the Gate is an extremely interesting novel set in Wellington, New Zealand in the 1930s. It is a work of fiction but many of the people and events mentioned in the novel are real. Even though the main character and narrator of the story is a 12-year-old boy, the story will appeal to both male and female readers aged 10+.

The story gives students a fascinating insight into life in New Zealand during the Depression. Students today would have no experience of a widespread epidemic such as the one experienced by the characters in the novel. The fact that Tom and his family are quarantined after Flo contracts polio gives students an idea of the loneliness and isolation experienced by those involved in the epidemic.

Tom is a likeable character who has a strong commitment to his goal of becoming a champion runner. He is also academic and his teacher Mr Moffat believes that he has the potential to become a doctor or a lawyer. Tom struggles when the school is shut and he is no longer able to see his friend Charlie. When his sister Flo becomes ill he is scared and angry and uncertain about what the future holds. However Tom is able to face these challenges and overcome them. He grows as a person and comes to realise what is really important.

Themes include dreams, the terror and confusion of being caught up in an epidemic, the importance of family, and the loneliness of isolation.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapter 1 (pp. 5-15), Chapters 2-12 (pp. 16-116), Chapters 13-24 (pp. 117-218) and Chapters 25-32 (pp. 219-286).

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. It is a good idea to conduct some library research on polio epidemics and 1930s New Zealand so that students understand the context of the story.

Have students track the development of the main character as the novel progresses and explain why these changes occur. Wherever possible students should try and relate Tom's life to their own experiences. Students should compare and contrast Tom's world with their own.

Encourage students to identify themes and explain how they are developed in the novel.

Introducing the Novel

Have students study the front cover of the novel and read the back cover blurb.

- Why do you think the novel is called *Enemy at the Gate*?
- What does being in quarantine mean?
- Who is the main character in the novel? What does he dream of doing?
- When and where is the story set?
- How would you feel if you weren't allowed to go to school or hang out with your friends?

Teacher reads Chapter 1 (pp. 5-15) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 5-15)

- What gang do Tom and Charlie belong to? Who is their rival gang?
- Who is Paddy?
- Who are the members of Tom's family?
- What do Tom's mother and Lily argue about?
- What does Tom's dad read about in the paper that scares his wife?
- What does Tom take from his father's room before he sneaks out?

Discussion

- What clues are there in the story that tells us it is set in the 1930's? What is the role of women during this time? How does this differ from today?
- What do we learn about Tom and his family during this chapter? What do you think is going to happen next?

Students read Chapters 2-12 (pp. 16-116) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 2-12 (pp. 16-116)

- How does Charlie's home life contrast with Tom's?
- Who is Tom's hero?
- What secret do you think Tom has that he doesn't want to tell Charlie?
- Where is Tom's favourite place to hang out in the summer?
- What does Tom use his father's watch for?
- Why does Tom tell Charlie to keep most of the driftwood that they collect? How does Charlie react to this suggestion?
- Who is Edie? Why do Tom's parents argue about her?
- Who are the members of the Freyberg Street gang?
- What information does Ellen give the others about infantile paralysis on the way to school?
- Why does Tom feel sorry for his brother Johnny?
- Why does Tom feel as though he has to compete with Ellen? What does this suggest about his personality?
- What do Tom and Charlie overhear Mr Moffat and Mr Gray talking about? Why do they feel so worried by their teachers' conversation?

- What does Tom discover when he reads the newspaper?
- What do Tom and Charlie decide to make in their holidays?
- Why does the school close early for the summer holidays? How does Tom's mother react when all of her children arrive home?
- Why does Tom feel as if there is tension in his household?
- Why are Charlie and Tom's parents so worried about them staying out in the sun? Do you think that their reason is valid? Why/why not?
- Why doesn't Tom's mum want Edie to come and visit? Do you think she is being selfish? Why/why not?
- Why doesn't Mrs Boyle want her children going to the library?
- When did the last outbreak of infantile paralysis occur? How many died? How many cases were there all together?
- What news does Lily give her siblings when they arrive home from the library? Why is Tom's dad so worried about the epidemic?
- What appears in the newspaper that upsets Flo?
- What happens when Tom sneaks into his father's room to replace the watch? What big secret does Tom reveal to his father? What does Tom's dad decide to do after their discussion?
- Why can't Edie, Frank and Meg visit until late January? How do Tom and the others react to the news?
- What activities does Tom's mother ban? Why does Tom feel like his visit to the beach is spoilt? How does he convince his mother to let him hang out with Charlie?
- How long do the epidemics usually last?
- What routine does Tom develop to try and protect his family?
- Describe Aunt Edie and Uncle Frank's visit. How are Tom's aunt and uncle different from his parents? Why do you think Tom's mother doesn't like Edie?
- What good news does Tom's dad read out to Flo from the paper?
- What does Flo convince Tom to donate to the hospital? What does this suggest about her character?
- What does Tom notice when he returns to school on March 1st?

Discussion

- Tom's hero is Jack Lovelock. Who is your hero and why do you admire them? How would you feel if you had the chance to meet your hero?
- Tom dreams of being an Olympic champion and trains hard to achieve his goal. What is your dream or aspiration? How do you plan to achieve your goal?

- What is the Depression? Why do you think the adults are so worried about not wasting anything?
- How does Tom deal with all of the fear and confusion around him? What do you do to deal with stress?
- How does the infantile paralysis outbreak affect Tom's life?
- Describe Tom's relationship with his parents. In what ways was family life in the 1930s different from family life today?
- What do you think happens that makes Tom forget about the circus?

Students read Chapters 13-24 (pp. 117-218) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 13-24 (pp. 117-218)

- Why does Tom believe that you have to be really desperate to go to the toilet at night? Who does Tom find when he gets up to investigate the noise that he hears? What is wrong with her? Who does Tom's mother call?
- Why do Tom's parents have trouble getting Flo to hospital?
- Why does Lily believe that the children might have to be quarantined? What does being in quarantine mean?
- Who does Tom vent his anger and frustration on?
- Why doesn't Tom ask his father about his running training?
- How do Tom and his family react when they receive the results of Flo's tests?
- Why does Lily decide not to give her parents Edie's letter?
- Who visits Tom while he is in quarantine? Why is Tom so surprised by this?
- What does Tom learn about infantile paralysis from Dr MacPherson? What does Dr MacPherson say to Tom when he leaves that suggests he is impressed by him?
- What does Flo have to do all day in the isolation ward? What does Tom's mother suggest that Tom do for his sister?
- Why is Tom glad to have Mr Moffat's work?
- Who sneaks out to visit Tom? What does Tom notice about his face? What explanation does the visitor give for his injury?
- How do the students react towards Tom when he returns to school? How does Mr Moffat make the situation better for Tom and Johnny? Is the students' attitude towards Tom fair? Why/why not?
- Who is the first person to welcome Tom back to school? Why is Tom so surprised about this?

- Why does the government start to provide free milk? Why does this pose such a problem for Charlie?
- What news does Mr Moffat give Tom's class in April? How will the students continue their lessons?
- How does Tom feel about having to complete his lessons at home?
- What does Tom miss about Flo?
- What does Tom mean when he says he feels "mean inside"?
- What does Tom write on the paper that his mother posts to Mr Moffat? How does Mr Moffat react to Tom's message? Why is Tom surprised by his reaction?
- Where does Charlie's mother send Charlie and Emmy? How does Charlie feel about going there? How does Tom feel about Charlie going away?
- Why doesn't Tom think that the news about Flo is "good"?
- What does Lily want to do when she is older? Why is Tom so surprised by this? Why is Lily worried that she might have to leave school soon?
- How do Tom and his family celebrate Coronation Day?
- Why doesn't Tom go running as much as he used to?
- Why do you think Charlie and Emmy enjoyed staying on the farm so much?
- In what does Mr Moffat offer to give Tom special tutoring? Who else is he tutoring? Why doesn't Tom mention the extra lessons to Charlie?

Discussion

- Why do you think Tom keeps having bad dreams? How do you feel when you wake up from a nightmare?
- What responsibilities does Lily assume when Flo falls ill and her parents spend a lot of time at the hospital? What does this suggest about her character? How would things be different today?
- If you were quarantined what would you miss doing the most and why?
- How does Tom deal with his sister's illness and his parents' absenteeism? How do you deal with traumatic or stressful events? Why does Tom feel so guilty about running?
- What sort of person is Mr Moffat? Is he a good teacher? Why/why not? What qualities does he possess? What does the fact that he visits Tom in quarantine suggest about his character?
- Describe how Flo would have felt, lying in the isolation ward, being unable to move.
- What does Tom's mum mean when she says "real life is not like that"?

Students read Chapters 25-32 (pp. 219-286) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 25-32 (pp. 219-286)

- What happens when winter finally arrives?
- How does Tom feel when his mother reads out Edie's letter?
- Why is July such a bad month for Lily?
- Why is Tom so shocked when his mother brings Flo's letter home for him? Why does Tom's mother tell him that they need to be patient with Flo?
- What does Tom learn about Flo's life in hospital from her letters? Why does Tom believe that hospital seems like a much happier place than home?
- Why does Tom lose interest in school, running and the other things that he used to enjoy?
- How does Tom feel when he starts having tutorials with Ellen? What happens that makes the tutorials more enjoyable?
- Describe Flo's first visit home. What physical differences does Tom notice when he sees her?
- What does Flo like to do best on her Sunday visits? Why doesn't Tom go off and play with Charlie when Flo is at home?
- Who comes and visits Flo regularly when she is home? Why do you think Flo enjoys her visits so much?
- What is the Kenny treatment?
- When does Flo come home for good? Why does Tom have so much trouble looking at Flo?
- Why can't Flo go back and visit Molly?
- Why doesn't Tom want to take part in the school athletics day? Who talks to Tom about his decision? What does he say to Tom that convinces him to change his mind?
- What does Mr Moffat give Tom that makes him feel elated?
- How do Tom's mother and Flo react when he says that he wants to start running again?
- What does the boy at the interschool sports say to Tom that fires him up? How does Tom feel when he wins the race?
- How do things change for Tom's family at the end of the year? What changes does Tom believe are the worst?
- How does Molly's death affect Flo?
- Why doesn't Tom look forward to his holidays?
- Why do you think Tom starts to include Johnny more in his activities? How does Tom's attention make Johnny feel?
- What does Tom find on the seat of the trolley? How does this make him feel better about Charlie's disappearance?

- Who is the new boy living in Charlie's house? Why does Tom believe that he and the boy could be friends?

Discussion

- How does Amelia Earhart's death affect Lily? Why do you think it affects her in this way? Why were women like Amelia Earhart and Jean Batten such important role models for girls during this time?
- What long-term effects does infantile paralysis have for Flo? How does she deal with her disease? How does her disease affect her family? Why does Tom feel so much guilt about his sister's illness?
- What sort of influence does Mr Moffat have on Tom's life? Have you had a teacher who has made a real difference for you? Explain how.
- How does Tom develop and change as the story progresses? What do you think he learns from his experiences?
- Identify a main theme in the story and explain how it is developed by the author.

Activities

Research - Complete a research assignment on either Jean Batten or Jack Lovelock. Formulate 3 focussing questions to guide your research. Use a range of written, oral and visual sources to gather your information. Record your research process and complete a bibliography. Present your research as a report or on a poster.

Plot - Complete a plot graph for *Enemy at the Gate*. Label the vertical axis "Level of Excitement". Label the horizontal axis "Events". List 15 important events that occur in the story on the horizontal axis. Plot each event on the graph according to its level of excitement. Identify the climax of the story.

Writing - Imagine that you are Flo and have been in the children's ward for months. Write a diary entry for her explaining what she has been doing, who she has met and how she feels about her illness.

Research - Conduct a research assignment about Amelia Earhart. Present your information to the class in role as Amelia Earhart.

Poem - Write a poem about how Tom feels when he is running. Use poetic language features such as metaphors and personification to create imagery.

Newspaper Front Page - Create a newspaper front page for a day in 1930s New Zealand. Include a banner headline, news articles about infantile paralysis and the Depression, as well as an advertisement.

Writing - Rewrite a chapter in the novel from a different character's point of view.

Static Image - Design a poster advertising *Enemy at the Gate* that could be displayed in the library. Remember, your poster should encourage people to read the novel. Combine verbal and visual features to convey your ideas.

Character - Write several paragraphs that explain Tom's character in the novel. What challenges does he face? How does he overcome them? What qualities and characteristics does he have? How does he develop and change as the novel progresses?

Theme - Complete a collage that illustrates an important theme from the story. Use words and images from the novel to convey your ideas.

Notes written by Vicki Williams