

# **“The Mine’s Afire!” The Journal of Tommy Carter, Brunnerton, 1896**

**Author:** Susan Battye and Thelma Eakin

## **Synopsis**

---

Tommy Carter is a typical boy living in the West Coast mining town of Dobson in 1896. He attends school, loves playing in the local band and catches eels with his friends in the Grey Valley creeks. Most of the men in Dobson work in the mines or have employment related to this industry. The work is perilous and the men are paid only per ton of coal, not for the hours worked. Tommy is not at all keen to follow his Uncle Fred down into the mine. The conditions are dangerous and the mine owners are more concerned with making a profit than worker safety.

One day a terrible explosion occurs in the mines and causes it to collapse. Many men and boys lose their lives on this day, despite heroic attempts by rescuers to save them. Tommy loses his Uncle, some friends, and his father is left seriously ill after the disaster. The town is left grieving and economically crippled. Many women are widowed and children are left fatherless. What is to become of Tommy’s Aunt y Edit h whose husband Fred has died? Will Tommy have to work in the mine when he leaves school, despite the dangers?

## **Text Type**

---

“The Mine’s Afire!” is a fictional diary about New Zealand’s worst-ever industrial disaster. It is the latest in the Scholastic “My Story” series and is based on actual events that occurred in Brunnerton in 1896. The story is told from a first person point of view. Through Tommy’s diary entries the reader is given a fascinating insight into New Zealand in the late 1800’s and Tommy’s thoughts and feelings about his experiences. Tommy is 12 years old, but like many boys at this time, will soon be leaving school and joining the workforce. Students interested in history will find his daily life intriguing as it contrasts so completely with the life of teenagers today. Tommy is a likeable and resilient character who has to deal with loss and hardship. His family is not wealthy and sometimes, especially when his father is sick, putting food on the table can be difficult.

Themes include family, tragedy, heroism and the fight of the underdog against a major corporation.

## Sharing the Novel

---

The novel contains diary entries and not chapters. It has been divided up as follows: Historical Note pp. 146- 149 and pp. 13- 22, pp. 23- 85 and pp. 86- 143. Each set of questions relates to the last full diary entry on the page number given.

It would be a good idea to have students conduct some library research into the Brunner mine disaster so that they understand the context of the story.

During the shared sessions encourage students to use the glossary provided at the beginning of the novel to clarify their understanding of mining terms included. Have them compare their lives with Tommy's in terms of leisure activities, school, friends and family. Students should be able to identify the impact that the disaster has on Tommy's family and other people in Brunnerton. Draw students' attention to the lack of rules and regulations regarding the safety of workers in the mine. The subsequent law suits also warrant discussion.

## Introducing the Novel

---

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

- When and where is the story set? What do you know about New Zealand during this time?
- Who does the diary belong to? What do you expect from a novel that is set out in diary form?
- What disaster happens in the mine? What do you think the after effects of such a tragedy would be in a small town?

**Teacher reads the Historical Note (pp. 146- 149) and pp. 13- 22 aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.**

## Comprehension pp. 146- 149 and pp. 13- 22

---

- When did the Brunner mine disaster occur?
- Who owned the mine? Who managed it?
- What industry did the population of Brunnerton rely on?
- What did the people of Brunnerton do in their leisure time?

- Why were the Depression years so difficult for the men and women of Brunnerton?
- How many men died in the tragedy? What happened to many of the men who went into the mine to rescue their friends?
- How much money was raised to help the victims' families?
- What did a Royal Commission decide was to blame for the explosion?
- What was the name of the case taken by a family of the victims against the coal company? How much compensation were they awarded?
- Where are the majority of the miners killed in the disaster buried?
- How old is Tommy?
- Who is James Geoghegan? How long has he been working in the mine? Where do the Geoghegan family come from? Why do they feel sorry for Tommy?
- Where does Tommy's Nan live? Where do both her daughters live? What is Auntie Edit's good news?
- Why does Tommy's father often get angry with the owners of the Coal Company? Why does Tommy think that his family is lucky?
- What instrument does Tommy play in the band? What is "the best birthday I've ever had"?
- Why does Tommy think that the bridge is a "marvel"?
- How many workers are employed at the mine?
- How does Tommy help out at the mine?
- How did Mr Roberts get burned? What does Tommy's father think that the company should provide for all of the workers?
- Why doesn't Tommy want to work in the mine?

### Discussion

- Describe the setting of the story. What is the social situation of the characters?
- What elements of life are difficult for many of the people of Brunnerton and Dobson? Tommy suggests that there is a real camaraderie between all of the men. Why do you think it is so important that they be able to rely on each other?
- How does Tommy's home life, school life and leisure activities contrast to yours?
- What modern conveniences would you miss the most if you lived in 1896, and why?

**Students read pp. 23- 85 independently before the next shared session.**

## Comprehension pp. 23- 85

---

- Describe the miners' picnic. What competition does Tommy win?
- Why does Tommy like his school teacher so much? What birds does Tommy see when he takes them into the bush? Which is Tommy's favourite?
- What job does Tommy's mum give him when Aunt y Edith's baby is coming?
- Why does Tommy feel sorry for the miners when he looks into the entrance to the mine?
- Why does Mr O'Flynn think that Tommy has been wagging? What punishment does he give him?
- What does Edith call her baby?
- How does Tommy know that something terrible has happened at the mine? Why does he decide to ignore his teacher's instructions? What does he see when he arrives at the mine?
- How does Otto Bishop take charge when he arrives at the scene? What does Dr McBrearty say that upsets the people at the mine?
- How do the women help at the mine while the rescuers are working?
- What happened to Mr Bishop?
- Who does the first body pulled from the mine belong to?
- Why does Dr McBrearty encourage the families to allow themselves to be photographed?
- Why does Tommy's mum send him home?
- Who telegraphed the Mine Manager and will be visiting Brunnerton?
- How does Tommy feel when he wakes up and realises that his mother and father are both still at the mine? What wonderful news does his mother give him when he arrives there?
- How many bodies were pulled out of the mine overnight?
- What announcement does Mr Seddon make when he arrives at the scene?
- How does Tommy feel when he sees his dad's red-striped socks? How does he know that his father is actually alive? Why is he vomiting blood?
- What terrible news does Mr Geoghegan give Tommy and his family that night?
- Why does Tommy have mixed feelings about playing his cornet at the funeral?
- How does Tommy react when his dad tells him that Uncle Fred is dead?
- Why are Tommy's family lucky compared to some?
- Where will most of the dead be buried?
- What does Tommy's dad say to him before the funeral?
- Describe the funeral. What does Tommy see that makes him cry? How does he support his mother? Why is the day after the funeral weird?

- Why does Mr Sheard feel bad?
- Why does Tommy's mum believe that "the poorest folks are always the ones who give the most"?
- Why do so many people disappear from Brunnerton after the disaster?
- How many new widows are there in the district?

### Discussion

- In the 1800's there were clearly defined roles for men and women. Explain what these were.
- Some of the boys killed in the disaster were only teenagers - some as young as 16. It is unlikely that boys so young would be working in such a dangerous environment these days. How was life different for boys back then?
- Why do you think there weren't rules and regulations in place to protect workers? What would happen to a company today if they allowed such a catastrophe to occur?
- Why is it so dangerous for the men who go into the mine to try and rescue their mates? What long-term effects do you think going into the mine after the explosion will have on the men? What does the fact that so many were willing to risk their own lives suggest about their characters? Why is it important to sometimes "put people before rules"?
- In what ways does the tragedy affect the community?

**Students read pp. 86- 143 independently before the next shared session.**

### Comprehension pp. 86- 143

---

- What does Tommy learn about the Brunner mine during Mr O'Flynn's geology lesson? Why does Mr O'Flynn become so emotional during the lesson?
- Why has a Royal Commission been called to look into the disaster?
- How does Mrs Coppersmith react when Mr Bishop places his hand on her shoulder? Why does she hate Mr Bishop so much?
- Why is Reverend York amazed at the generosity of the people of Brunner during times of hardship?
- What is a "scab"?
- Why is Mr Geoghegan so angry about the death of his sons?
- How many children have been left fatherless by the disaster?
- Why did Richard Collins have to leave school?

- How do Mrs Collins' children react when he puts the food down on the table?
- What does Tommy mean when he says that Mrs Collins needs "more than prayer and good works right now"?
- What idea does Tommy's mum come up with to help Auntie Edith?
- How does Tommy feel when his dad tells him that they will build him a hut?
- What piece of music does Tommy have to play in the music contest?
- What was The Brunner Demonstration?
- Why do Tommy's parents feel bad when Edith walks in and finds them dancing?
- What does Tommy give Mary as a christening gift?
- Why is everybody hoping that the management of the mine will be found at fault for the disaster by the Royal Commission?
- Why does Tommy's mum want him to go to the Royal Commission? What does he report back to his mother? What were the Commission's findings? Where are the people of Brunnerton so upset by this?
- Why is Saturday June 6<sup>th</sup> "the big day"?
- How does Tommy feel when he gets up to play his cornet during the competition? Why is he determined to do well?
- How does Tommy feel about winning the competition?
- How do Tommy and his classmates react when Mr O'Flynn reads the committee's findings? How does the report affect Auntie Edith? How does Tommy's dad convince Edith that staying in Dobson is the right thing to do?
- How old is Tommy when he finishes school? What job does he get employed to do? Why is he so happy about this?
- What things have changed since the disaster in the mine? What has remained the same?
- What is the outcome of Mr Geoghegan's case against the Coal Company? Why does Tommy find listening to the testimony so traumatic? Why is everyone so shocked by Mr Bishop's evidence?
- What happens when the Coal Company is ordered to give the victims' families compensation?

### Discussion

- What are the main messages that come through in this novel?
- Did the families of the victims ever get justice? Why/why not?
- What lessons do you think the Coal Mining Company and the victims' families learnt from this disaster?
- Why is this a story of both tragedy and heroism?

## Activities

---

**Paragraph** - Write a paragraph explaining the differences between life in New Zealand in 1896 and today.

**Collage** - Make a collage that illustrates a main theme from the story.

**Plot** - Create a flow diagram that shows the main events in the novel in chronological order.

**Newspaper front page** - Design a newspaper front page for "The Grey River Argus". Remember to include a banner headline, a lead article about the mine explosion that includes quotes from people involved and advertisements that reflect the 1896 time period.

**Research** - Conduct a research assignment on the Brunnerton mining disaster. Formulate focussing questions. Present your findings in a report, on a poster or as an oral presentation.

**Character** - Rewrite one of Tommy's diary entries from another character's point of view.

**Plot** - Design a story board that shows 10 important events from the story in the order that they occur. Under each illustration include a brief description about what is happening.

**Writing** - Write an epilogue for the story 5 years after the last diary entry.

**Review** - Write a book review for *The Mine's Afire*. Include a brief plot summary. Explain the setting and the themes of the story. Include information about the main characters and the style of the book. Remember to include your personal opinion about the novel.

**Issue** - Choose an important issue presented in the story and create a role play about it.

**Character** - Draw a picture of Tommy on a piece of cartridge paper. Around his picture write as many adjectives as you can that describe his character.

Notes written by Vicki Williams