

# **My Story: Kauri In My Blood**

## **The Diary of Laura Ann Findlay, the Coromandel, 1921-24**

Author: **Joanna Orwin**

### **Synopsis**

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Laura Ann Findlay lives with her parents in the Kauaeranga Valley. It is the 1920's and the last of the Kauri trees are being cleared for timber and farmland. Laura goes to school and is an excellent student. She is preparing to sit her proficiency exam at the end of the year, even though she has only just turned 11. Laura's father drives haulers, which drag Kauri logs down the main tramline.

Life is going well for the Findlay's until an old injury that her father sustained while working flairs up. He requires surgery and the family moves to Auckland to stay with Laura's grandmother. Laura's older brothers Harry and Jimmy are forced to remain behind and continue working. It is the first time in Laura's life that circumstances have meant that her family can't be together. She doesn't like her new school and her grandmother is a cantankerous old woman who disapproves of her daughter's husband. Because Laura's dad can only work at light duties it is decided that Laura's mother will have to return to work as a bush cook, and Laura will be her offsider. Despite the fact that Laura has to leave school and won't be able to complete her proficiency exam she is excited by the prospect of returning to the bush. She loves the excitement of the camps and is willing to work hard to help her mother and father. But when Laura returns to the Kauaeranga Valley she finds that many of her old friends have changed or moved on. It is not until she meets Tom Norton, a young man who lives at a nearby camp, that she begins to feel truly happy again. Now she only has to save up enough money to buy a horse to replace Patches who had to be sold when her father fell ill, and she will feel complete.

### **Text Type**

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*Kauri In My Blood, The Diary of Laura Ann Findlay, The Coromandel, 1921-24* is a fascinating insight into the life of a young girl living in the Kauaeranga Valley in the 1920's. The story is based on the life of Ruth Murray, who grew up in the bush camps and had a unique and unusual childhood for a girl living during that time.

The story is told in diary form. The reader is privy to all of Laura's thoughts and feelings as she grows up in the rough bush camps in the Kauaeranga Valley. Laura is an intelligent and vibrant young girl who enjoys exploring and

hunting in the bush, riding her horse and shooting with her brother. She is adaptable, resilient and hardworking.

*Kauri In My Blood* provides readers with a fascinating insight into life in the New Zealand bush camps in the 1920's. The novel is based on a true story and provides historically accurate information about how Kauri was logged during this time. Life was difficult for families living in the bush. The work was extremely dangerous, there was no social welfare and if you were unable to work then your family could well starve.

Students will find Laura's adventures in the bush captivating. Laura's life is vastly different to that of a child living today. She is forced to leave school at age 11 and begin a gruelling job as a cook's offsider. Young people during this time grew up very quickly and were expected to take on a lot of responsibility. Despite this, Laura is extremely happy. She thrives on the excitement of the bush and is doted on by the men who work there.

*Kauri In My Blood* has wide appeal for readers of both genders and will fascinate students who take pleasure in reading true stories and enjoy history.

## Sharing the Novel

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***The novel has been divided up as follows: Historical Note (pp. 205-211) and pp. 9-15, pp. 16-115 and pp. 119-204.***

***During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. Have them read the historical note and carry out some library research before beginning the novel so that they understand the historical context of the story. Students should compare their lives today with Laura's in the 1920's. Encourage them to analyse Laura's character and explain how she is shaped by her experiences.***

## Introducing the Novel

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

- Who does the diary belong to? What do you expect from a story told in diary form?
- When is the story set? What do you know about this era?
- Where does Laura live? What does she do for a job?
- What do you think life would have been like in a bush camp during this time?

Students read the Historical Note (pp. 205-211) and study the photographs.

- Why did the arrival of Maori settlers have a dramatic impact on the forests?
- How much of the forests had disappeared by the 1600's?

- How did many people earn a living between 1820 and the 1930's?
- How many cubic metres of Kauri were logged in 1906?
- Which company bought logging rights over 180,000 hectares of Kauri forests in 1889? How much forest remains today?
- What is the name of the largest surviving Kauri? How big is it?
- What was Kauri used for? Why was Kauri gum so sought after?
- Who lived in the purpose built bush camps?
- Who won the largest Kauri Timber Company contract ever offered?
- Why was it so difficult to extract the logs from the Kauaeranga Valley? How did the men overcome these problems?

**Teacher reads pp. 9-15 aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.**

### **Comprehension pp. 9-15**

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- How do the bushmen fell the Kauri tree? What dangers do they face? How does Laura feel when she sees the Kauri felled?
- What is date of the first entry that Laura makes in her diary? Why does Miss Price want the senior students to keep a diary?
- Who will be sitting the proficiency exam at the end of the year with Laura? What kind student is Laura?
- How does Laura feel about her brother Harry?
- What was Laura's father's first job in the Coromandel? What does he do now?
- What are the booms? How do the bushmen ensure that there is enough water to carry the logs down to the main river? What do the bushmen do when the logs reach the booms?

### **Discussion**

- What do we know about Laura and her family so far?

**Students read pp. 16-115 independently before the next shared session.**

### **Comprehension pp. 16-115**

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- What are haulers? What are lokeys?
- Where does the main tramline start and finish?
- What job will Laura's brother Harry take up at Christmas?
- How old is Jimmy? How does Laura feel about her eldest brother? What job will Jimmy be doing at the Main Dam Camp?
- How did Laura's dad get injured? Why is her mother so worried about him?
- What is the name of Laura's pony? Why did her father buy Laura the pony?
- What does Laura wear when she is hunting? Who are Buster and Bully? What does Laura's family do with the turkeys that they catch?

- Why does Mick Findlay decide to stop coming home during the week?
- Why did Mr Sutton have to bring in expert miners to widen the river and smooth the bends?
- Why does Miss Price give her students a day off school? Why do you think this event is so well attended? Describe the mood of the people who are there.
- Why does it have to rain before a drive? Why do the men clear the bush and ferns from the banks of the river?
- Describe what Laura sees when the dam gate is triggered? What emotions does Laura feel as she watches the event?
- What is Laura's classroom also used for?
- What is Saturday night's dance used to raise money for?
- How does Miss Price react when she overhears Harry's thoughtless comment about the cable? What would happen if the hauler cable snapped?
- How many hours do the bushmen work? Once a contract starts when do the bushmen get time off?
- Where does Laura stay when she goes and visits her father during the holidays? Why is she so worried about her father?
- Why does Miss Price send the seniors to Thames for the week? What does Laura decide to write her essay on for the Proficiency exam? List 5 facts contained in Laura's essay.
- What does Laura get for her 11<sup>th</sup> birthday?
- Who is Tom Simpson? How does Laura's mum show kindness to the old drifters?
- Why do Laura, her younger sisters and her parents go to Auckland? Why do Jimmy and Harry stay behind? Who will Laura's brothers stay with over Christmas? Why does Laura decide to defer her Proficiency exam? Where does Laura's family stay while in Auckland?
- Describe Laura's grandmother. How does Laura feel about her? Why doesn't she approve of her daughter's husband?
- Why do Laura's parents decide to return to the bush? Why don't they return to the Kauaeranga? How will Laura help her mother? How much money will she earn? Why can't Meg and Pat leave Auckland with the rest of the family?
- Describe Mill camp. What does Laura's job entail? Where does she sleep?
- How do the men in the camp treat Laura? Who has a daughter Laura's age? What does he suggest that Laura and his daughter do together? How does Laura feel about his offer?
- What job does Mr Sillars give Mick Findlay when he is well again?
- What does Laura learn when she goes into the bush with Old Tom? Why does Tom leave the tree on the edge of the ridge unmarked?
- What surprise does Mr Sillars have for Laura?
- How does the knocker work? What happens when Laura pulls it? How is Laura affected by her experience?
- Why do Laura's parents decide to return to the Kauaeranga? What will Laura miss about Waitawheta?

## Discussion

- Describe life in the bush. What dangers do the workers face? What do you think would happen to them and their families if they had an accident? What safeguards do we have today to protect our livelihoods that weren't available in the 1920's?
- What challenges did the loggers who worked in the Kauaeranga Valley face when they began extracting the logs? How did the geography of the area make their job more difficult and how did they deal with the problems presented?
- What do Laura and her family do for fun? How does this contrast with what you do today? How does Laura combat loneliness? Why is it so important for her to have friends her own age?
- What have we learnt about Laura so far? What kind of person is she? What does she enjoy doing? What kind of relationship does she have with her parents? Her brothers and sisters? How does Laura's life in the 1920's contrast with yours today? What would you miss the most about modern life and why?
- How would you feel if you were expected to leave school when you were 12 or 13 and go to work to help support your family? Why do you think the government imposed a school leaving age of 16?

**Students read pp. 119-204 independently before the next shared session.**

## Comprehension pp. 119-204

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- What changes does Laura notice in Harry when she sees him on the lokey? In what ways has he stayed the same? Why does Laura feel resentful towards him?
- What surprise does Jimmy have for Laura?
- How is Moss camp different from the Waitawheta camp?
- Why does Laura feel a little awkward when she first catches up with Alice and Katie? What news does Alice have for her? How does Laura react to this news?
- Why doesn't Laura's target practice with Harry turn out like she expected? Why do they both get in so much trouble with their parents? What is Laura's punishment?
- Why does Laura see so little of Alice and Katie?
- Why does Laura decide to dig for Kauri gum? Who lends her their gear? Why does her father relent and give Laura her gun back? How successful is she?
- Describe the get-together at the Melich's.
- What does Laura decide to do with her Kauri gum?
- Why does Laura go away with Ernie Hayes? Why does Ernie growl Laura when she begins asking the cook at the Main Dam Camp questions? What aspects of the trip does Laura enjoy the most?

- What does Laura's mother give her for her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday? What does Brian Tomkins give her? What does Laura do in Thames on her day off?
- Describe Jimmy and Margaret's wedding. Where do they go for their honeymoon? Why will Margaret go back to live with her parents when they return?
- How does Ted Hayes hurt his leg? Why does he want to remain at Booms camp? How does Laura help him out?
- Why are the police looking for Walter Jones? Why is Laura torn about whether she should tell the police where he is? Do you think she makes the right decision? Why/why not?
- Why is Mrs Norton so pleased to see Laura? Who is Tom? Why does Laura get so excited when she meets him?
- What sorts of things do Laura and Tom do together? In what ways are they alike?
- Why do the bushmen think that Tom is getting too cocky? How do they teach him a lesson?
- How does Tom help Laura earn money to buy her horse?
- What does Laura learn about felling Kauris from Bob?
- Why does Mr Norton have all his men out watching the dams?
- Why do Mr and Mrs Norton begin to worry about Bob? What happened to him to cause him to be so late? Why is everything more dangerous in the bush when it is wet?
- What happens when Mr Norton triggers all the dams? Why is Laura's mum worried when she thinks the booms have been breached? What happens to the logs?
- What fabulous gift does Tom surprise Laura with at the races?

### **Discussion**

- How did the government policy towards Kauri trees in the 1920's differ from today's government's policy? Why do you think conservation is considered so important today? What has been done by the Department of Conservation to protect the remaining Kauris? Why would it be such a shame if Kauri trees were allowed to be completely eradicated?
- How would you feel if your parents expected you to get married at 15 and chose your future spouse? What cultures still believe in arranged marriages today? What possible problems could this practice cause? Why do you think Alice is so resigned to her fate? Why isn't Laura interested in getting married?
- In what ways is Laura different from her female friends? What characteristics and qualities does she have that make her ideally suited to life in the bush?
- What is your opinion about bush law?

## Activities

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**Newspaper front page** – Design a newspaper front page for a day written about in Laura’s diary. Invent a name for your newspaper and design a banner headline. Include a feature story, a news article and at least one advertisement for a product or service that would have been around during that time.

**Research** – Conduct a research assignment on Kauri and its history in New Zealand. Formulate 3 focussing questions to guide your research. Use a range of written, oral and visual sources to gather your information. Present your findings as an essay, on a poster or as an oral presentation.

**Timeline** – Complete a timeline of important events that occur in Laura’s life.

**Board game** – Design a fun board game that Laura and Tom could play in the bush camps.

**Character** – Choose 5 items that are important to Laura and explain why she couldn’t do without them.

**Static Image** – Design a web page advertising *Kauri In My Blood*. Include a brief summary of what the story is about, a description of the main character and comment on the main themes of the story. Illustrate your web page with images from the text. You may like to include links to other pages such as additional information about the author and historical information.

**Poem** – Write a poem about Laura’s life in the bush camps. Use figurative language to create imagery.

**Pamphlet** – Design a pamphlet about Kauri trees that could be shown to tourists.

**Setting** – Draw a map of the Coromandel that shows all of the important setting mentioned in the book. You may like to adapt the map provided at the front of the book.