

Poor Man's Gold – The Diary of Rueben Radcliffe, Northland, 1899-1900

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Synopsis

Times are tough for Rueben and his family. His father is not making enough money from the shop he owns in Waipapa, and the bank forecloses on a loan. Unfortunately the store is attached to the family's home, so before they know it they have been forced out and have to move into a tent. With no money and little food, the family is broken up temporarily when Rueben is forced to leave school and move with his father up North to find work.

Up North Rueben joins a gang of Dalmatian gumdiggers. They are friendly and giving and teach Rueben everything he needs to know about how to dig the valuable, ancient Kauri gum that lies preserved in the swamps. Rueben comes to love the hard work and rugged camaraderie of the gumfields. When the Dalmatian gumdiggers move on Rueben gets a dog called Lucky for company. He becomes a strong and independent young man who is able to contribute financially to his family.

Soon Rueben's mother, sister Olive and brother Walter move to be with Rueben and his father. Things are beginning to improve for the family when tragedy strikes. Walter, Rueben's younger brother drowns while he is visiting Rueben in the gumfields. Rueben is racked with guilt and he and his family are overcome with grief. A change is needed for all of them, so when Rueben's dad is offered a job running a boarding house and gum-store in Paua, he decides to take it and the family move once more. Rueben has given up on digging gum since Walter's death? What will he do in the new place?

Text Type

Poor Man's Gold is an insight into the life of a fourteen year-old boy living in the North of New Zealand in 1899-1900. The story is based on the life of Reuben Radcliffe, who like other children living during these times, had a difficult and challenging childhood. He was forced to leave school and go to work so that his family could afford food and shelter.

The story is told in diary form. The reader is privy to all of Rueben's thoughts and feelings as he works in the rough camps in the North. Rueben is an intelligent and vibrant young boy who revels in the hard work of digging gum. He matures very quickly once he moves away from his family and enjoys learning from the Dalmatian gumdiggers and the camaraderie that he shares with them. Rueben is adaptable, resilient and hardworking.

Poor Man's Gold provides readers with a fascinating insight into life in the North of New Zealand at the turn of the 20th century. The novel is based partially on the lives of real people and provides historically accurate information about how Kauri gum was dug, graded and sold during this time. The work was difficult and the hours were long. There was no social welfare so if you were unable to work then your family could starve.

Students will find Rueben's adventures captivating. His life is vastly different to that of a child living today. He is forced to leave school and begin a gruelling job. Young people during this time grew up quickly and were expected to take on a lot of responsibility. Despite this, Rueben is happy. An interesting aspect of the novel is the clearly defined roles of men and women (and boys and girls). As a boy Rueben is allowed to do as he pleases and is given an autonomy and freedom that his sister Olive can only dream of.

Unfortunately living and working conditions could be dangerous and as such, tragedy often affected people. Rueben is deeply affected by the death of his younger brother and feels guilt for his own perceived role in Walter's death.

Poor Man's Gold has wide appeal for readers of both genders and will fascinate students who take pleasure in reading stories based on factual information and enjoy history.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Historical Note (pp. 176- 179) and Chapter 1 (pp. 5- 14), Chapters 2- 11 (pp. 15- 102) and Chapters 12- 20 (pp. 103- 175).

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 Reuben's in the 1899/1900.

Encourage them to analyse Rueben's character and explain how he is shaped by his experiences. A glossary and a map are provided by the author to help clarify unfamiliar terms and show the reader exactly where Rueben's journey takes him.

Introducing the Novel

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

- Describe the photographs on the cover of the novel. What do these reveal about the setting of the story and the conditions of the workers?
- Who does the diary belong to? What timeframe does it cover? Where is it set? What do you expect from a novel that is set out in diary form?
- Why do Rueben and his father have to leave their home? Why does Rueben have to leave school? What does he end up doing as a job?
- What tragedy do you think occurs in the story?

Read the Historical Note on pp. 175-179, study the map and look at the photographs.

- What is Kauri gum called in Maori? How is it formed? Where is Kauri gum found?
- What did Maori use Kauri gum for?
- Who was the first European to write about Kauri gum?
- How much Kauri gum was exported overseas from 1845-1945?
- What was Kauri gum used for? Why are some of these purposes now obsolete?
- Why is Kauri gum highly prized for making jewellery?
- What became of the Dalmatian gumdiggers after the gum-digging trade slowly dwindled away?
- Which three characters in the novel are based on real people?

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

Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 5- 14)

- What writing exercise does Mr Blaketon give Rueben, Hec and Flynn at the start of the year? What does Rueben aspire to be?
- Where does Rueben live? Who does he live with? What piece of furniture does Rueben describe as "the centre of our lives"?

- What does Rueben's dad do for a job? How does Olive help him? What are Rueben and Walter expected to do?
- What does Rueben's dad do when gumdiggers bring in sacks of gum? Where is the gumdigger from? Why does Olive think that her father is too generous with the gumdiggers?
- What problems does Rueben's dad have with the bank?
- What are the latest crazes for boys and girls?
- Why does Rueben miss a day of school? How does Mr Blaketon react when he arrives back at school?
- What is "grubstaking"? How does this benefit the digger? How does it benefit Rueben's dad?

Discussion

- What clues are there in this Chapter that suggest Rueben's family has little money?
- What differences are there between Rueben's life in 1899 and your life today? What modern conveniences do we have that Rueben does not? If you lived in 1899 what would you miss the most about your life and why?
- What do you think will happen to Rueben and his family if the bank forecloses on the loan?

Students read Chapters 2- 11 (pp. 15- 102) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 2- 11 (pp. 15- 102)

- Why is Rueben's dad having so much trouble paying off the loan? What does Rueben mean when he says "everyone and everything depends on someone and something else"?
- What happens to Walter when he becomes stressed?
- How does Mr Blaketon react when Rueben tells him that he might leave school soon and get a job? Why don't Rueben's parents want Olive to go near Rueben's teacher?
- What do Hec and Flynn's fathers do for jobs? What does Flynn's father say about the gumdiggers?
- What does Rueben learn from Blakey about where the people that live in Waipapa come from? Who are the "remittance men"? Why is it offensive to call people from a foreign country "aliens"?

- Describe what happens when Rueben's dad opens the letter from the bank. What is the family able to rescue from their house and store? Who lends them a tent?
- How does Mr Blaketon react when Rueben's dad tells him that Rueben is leaving school? Why does Rueben feel like he has turned a corner of his life when he leaves school?
- What special things has each family member left in the house?
- Why does Walter have to stay home from school? What does Mr Blaketon give Rueben when he goes in to tell him that Walter will be away?
- What are Rueben and his father able to find and catch in the way of food for the family?
- What does Mr Blaketon suggest that Rueben's dad should do as a job? Why isn't Henry keen to do this? How does Rueben's mother react to the suggestion?
- What job does Olive get?
- How does Rueben feel when his dad brings home the gumdigging gear?
- Where do Rueben and his father plan to go to dig gum? How do they get there? Describe Rueben's journey. What physical and mental challenges does he face?
- Who does Henry meet on the journey who puts them up? What favour did Henry do for the man that made him feel indebted to him?
- Why doesn't Henry want to dig gum in Mangonui?
- How are Henry and Rueben able to communicate while they are on the road?
- What position does Mr Subritzky offer Henry? Why is he initially reluctant to accept?
- Who teaches Rueben how to dig for gum? Describe the process. What physical elements does Rueben face while trying to dig for gum?
- What is a joker? How does this help Rueben with his job?
- Why is Rueben so keen to live with the Dalmatians? How does he convince his father that it is a good idea?
- Describe the Dalmatian's camp. What does Rueben sleep on? What furniture is in the tents? What aspects of Dalmatian culture does Rueben find interesting? What sort of reputation do the Dalmatians have with the other people in town?
- How does Rueben scrape the gum? Why does it have to be scraped?
- Why are there very few Dalmatian women in New Zealand? How do Dalmatian men end up with the woman that they will marry?
- What job does Rueben really hate doing?
- What happens when the gum-dealer arrives in camp? Why does Rueben take all of his sacks back to Awanui?

- What do Rueben and the others do at the camp to alleviate the boredom?
- Why does Johan want the gumdiggers to move up North? Why doesn't Henry want Rueben to go with them?
- What do Rueben and Henry build in anticipation of the rest of the family's arrival?
- Why does Rueben tire of his family so quickly?
- Where does Olive find a job?
- How does Rueben's family react when he tells them that he is joining the Dallies at Te Kao? What compromise do they reach?
- Why does Rueben enjoy working by himself so much? Describe his routine. What solution does Walter come up with to alleviate Rueben's loneliness?
- Where does Henry find Lucky? How does Rueben feel about her initially? What causes him to change his mind?
- How does Rueben know that someone has been at his camp? How does the invasion make Rueben feel? Why does Rueben move his camp?
- Why does the wet weather make Rueben so miserable?
- Why does Rueben feel like his mother and Olive keep nagging him?
- What calamity happens on October 14th? Why does Rueben suggest that Walter come with him to Lucky's camp? Why does Rueben enjoy having him around?

Discussion

- Why is Rueben's mother angry about the fact that his father doesn't have a plan if the bank forecloses on the loan? In what ways could Rueben's dad have been better prepared for this eventuality?
- Describe Henry Radcliffe. What do we learn about his character and attributes in this section of the book? Do you agree with Rueben's mum when she says "you're too nice for your own good"? Explain your answer.
- In what ways do the Radcliffe's friends and neighbours help them when they are evicted from their home?
- The Radcliffe's live in very poor circumstances when they are forced to leave their home. Describe the conditions that they live in. What challenges do they face?
- Compare and contrast how you live today with how Rueben lived in 1899/1900.
- Describe Rueben. What qualities and characteristics does he exhibit? Find examples from the story to back up your ideas. What responsibilities is he forced to take on at the young age of 13? How is his life as a 13 year-old different to that of 13 year-olds today?
- At this time there were clearly defined roles for men and women. Explain what kind of work men were supposed to do and what women were supposed

to do. What advantages does Rueben have being a boy that Olive doesn't have?

- Predict what will happen next in the story.

Students read Chapters 12- 20 (pp.103- 175) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 12- 20 (pp. 103- 175)

- What big news does Rueben learn when he arrives back home?
- Describe Walter's toasting fork. What other skills does he learn at Lucky's camp? How does he keep Rueben entertained?
- What new piece of gear does Rueben add to his gumdigging tools?
- Who comes and stays with Rueben and Walter at Lucky's camp?
- What signs were there that Walter was not well? Why didn't Rueben recognise them? What alerted Rueben and Marko to the fact that something was wrong? Where do they find Walter? Who arrives to take Walter's body home? Why does Rueben feel so guilty about what happened?
- Describe what happens when Rueben arrives home with his brother's body. How does each family member deal with their grief?
- Who offers Rueben a job after Walter's death? Why is he so happy to accept it? What is Rueben's new job? What aspects of it does he have difficulty with?
- What grievances do the gumdiggers have with Mr Evans? What does Rueben mean when he says "there's always two sides to every story"?
- What news does Mr Blaketon deliver to the Radcliffe family? Why aren't Rueben's parents very pleased to see him? Why do you think they are hospitable to him despite their reservations? What does Olive reveal to him about her hopes for the future?
- Why does Rueben sail to Auckland? Describe his journey. Who does he see in Russell? Where is the worst place that Rueben calls into?
- Why does the Paeroa stay in port in Auckland longer than usual? What does Rueben learn about the gum trade while he accompanies Mr Batchelder on his rounds?
- Where does Rueben run into Hec's father? Where is Hec staying? What is Hec training to be? How has he changed since Rueben last saw him?
- What does Rueben spend his last day in Auckland doing? Why does Rueben miss the ship? Where does he go?

- How does Rueben get back home? What do you think would have happened if Hec's dad wasn't able to lend him some money? What does the lady at Donnelly's Crossing give Rueben to take with him? Describe Rueben's Christmas day.
- What are the men that Rueben comes across on Christmas day doing? What is the difference between bush gum and range gum? Which is worth more? What happens when the men give Rueben a go?
- Why is Rueben's mother so surprised when Rueben walks across the Subritzky's paddock?
- Why is the annual New Year's Day picnic so special this year? Why can't Rueben attend the picnic?
- Why is Rueben so keen to get back to work? Why is the price of gum dropping?
- Why does Rueben's mother call for the doctor? What is his diagnosis? How does Henry react to the doctor's comments?
- What is Henry's new plan? How do Olive and Rueben's mum feel about Henry's plan? Why does Rueben think that it is a good idea?
- What does Mr Evans give Rueben when he learns that he and his family are moving?
- How does Rueben decide to travel to Paua?
- How does Rueben earn the money to pay for the saddle?
- What happens when Rueben's mother borrows Buster?
- Who shows Rueben how to make gum jewellery? What does he take home to his mother?
- What does Olive plead with her parents to let her do? How do they react to her suggestions? Why does Olive resent Rueben?
- What advice does Mr Evans give Rueben before he leaves on his journey?
- Why is Rueben's mum pleased when she sees the boarding house? Describe the family's new home. What jobs does Henry allocate to each family member? Why are they all so busy?
- Why does Rueben decide that he wants to be a musterer?
- Where does Rueben see Luka and Marko?
- What problems does the flood cause?
- What is in Mr Blaketon's parcel for Rueben? What has he included for Olive?
- What does Rueben give his mother when she reveals that she is thinking about Walter?
- What does Uncle Jules want Rueben to write him an article about?
- What exciting plans does Rueben have for the future?

Discussion

- Why it is so important to have a funeral for a loved one who has passed away? How does Rueben help honour the memory of his brother? Why are important days such as birthdays and Christmas especially difficult after a loved one has died?
- There are no rules or regulations in the gum industry. Why is it so important to have a standard grading system that everyone has to adhere to? What problems are caused by this lack of consistency?
- How does Hec's life in town contrast with Rueben's life in the bush?
- How does Rueben's character develop and change as the novel progresses?
- Identify an important theme in the story and explain how it is developed by the author.

Activities

Writing - Complete the writing assignment set by Mr Blaketon for his students. Write a story about leaving the country of your birth and travelling to a new country, where you have to settle and make a living. Remember to describe your thoughts and feelings about leaving home and arriving in a strange country.

Static Image - Design a brochure that is a "how to" for a new gumdigger. Include illustrations and information on what equipment is needed and how to go about digging gum.

Static Image - Design a poster to attract people into becoming gumdiggers. Include information and pictures that illustrate the benefits of digging gum for the digger and his family. Remember to combine verbal and visual features to convey your ideas.

Poem - Write a poem about Rueben's experiences in the gum fields. Use a range of figurative language features to create imagery and atmosphere.

Research - Conduct a research assignment on either: Dalmatian immigrants and their contribution to New Zealand society, or gumdigging at the turn of the century in New Zealand. Formulate 3 focussing questions to guide your research. Gather your information from a range of oral, visual and written sources. Record your research process and present your information on a poster.

Oral Presentation - Imagine that you are Rueben Radcliffe. Present a speech to the class about your experiences in the gumfields. Include information about the work you do, the hardships you face, what it is like being away from your family, and your thoughts and feelings about your situation.

Puzzle - Design a crossword or word find about gum digging that Rueben could do to keep himself entertained when it is raining.

Character - Write at least two paragraphs about Rueben's character. Explain what strengths and weaknesses he has, what qualities and characteristics he exhibits, what motivates him and what his ambitions are. Use quotes and examples from the story to back up your ideas.

Drama - Choose an exciting part of the story and write a script for it. Remember to include a cast of characters and stage directions. Practise your play and present it to the class.

Newspaper Front Page - Design a front page for the New Zealand Gazette. Include a banner headline, a feature article, a photograph, a news article and an advertisement.

Notes written by Vicki Ladd