

# Salt River

Author: Elizabeth Hegarty

## Synopsis

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Tom Pook is a resourceful and capable 14 year-old who lives with his large family in a tiny shack on the Kaipara Harbour. It is the 1920's in New Zealand and at 14 Tom is considered a man by his father and has to help on the fishing boat and assume other important responsibilities, including looking after his seven brothers and sisters while his parents are away. Kohi and Ted Pook are going North for a week to get married and Ted makes it clear to Tom before he goes that just because he is away, there is no reason for the whole family to stop earning money. So Tom has to get all the work done, get the kids to school and keep up with all the fishing. Tom feels nervous about letting his father down. He knows that his sister Mary will help him, but as for his other siblings...

Tom's parents have only been gone one day when disaster occurs. Marina, upset at being yelled at by her brother, disappears just before everyone heads off to church. Tom stays behind and eventually finds her in the bush. She has fallen out of a tree and hurt her foot so she is unable to attend school with the others. Tom is terrified that his parents will find out about this mishap. Even though it isn't his fault he will get the blame and probably be whipped by Ted. When Ted and Kohi return from their trip Tom tells them that everything went smoothly in their absence. What Tom doesn't think of is how much worse it will be if he doesn't tell his father what has been going on since he has been gone and he hears it from somebody else. This is exactly what happens. While Ted is out on the boat another fisherman called Bunnie Tilbey asks how Marina is after she got lost in the bush. Ted disciplines Tom violently, and having lost all faith in him, informs him that he is now a man, and on his own.

Ted proves that he means what he says when Tom is dragged off the boat and caught underwater. Instead of rescuing his son, he leaves him to either save himself, or drown. Luckily Tom survives, but the experience leaves him disillusioned when his father and his life in Kaipara. Does he really want to spend his life fishing and supporting his family, or is there more out there for him?

## Text Type

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Salt River is a fascinating New Zealand novel written by Elizabeth Hargarty. The novel was the 2008 winner of the Tom Fitzgibbon award and is about a real person called Tom Pook. The story is set in the 1920's and revolves around Tom's life at Kaipara Harbour. Like many children living in rural communities during this time, Tom has a difficult and challenging childhood. He can't read or write and has left school so that he can work and help support his family. Students will find Tom's life fascinating because his structured and disciplined existence contrasts sharply with the lives of teenagers in the new millennium.

Although the story is told from third person point of view, the reader is privy to all of Tom's private thoughts and feelings as he struggles to live up to his father's extremely high expectations of him. Tom is only 14 years-old but is considered a man by Ted. He is expected to assume many responsibilities and rarely has any leisure time. Tom is a courageous and resilient teenager who has few choices in life. He assumes that he will always work as a fisherman and help support his family. That is until he receives a letter from the Marine Department containing a cheque for twenty pounds. The cheque is to reward Tom for his bravery when he saved some passengers from the Matai's surfboat. For once Tom has options and he begins to consider what he would like to do with his life.

Themes in the story include family responsibilities and obligations versus individual needs, courage, parental expectations and growing up.

## Sharing the Novel

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**The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapter 1 (pp. 11- 18), Chapters 2- 13 (pp. 9- 126) and Chapters 14- 24 (pp. 127- 220).**

**During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. Students should make inferences and predictions about what will happen next as they read.**

**It would be a good idea to do some research on New Zealand in the 1920's so that students understand the context of the story.**

**Encourage students to study the character of Tom and examine his qualities and characteristics as well as his motivations. Wherever possible have students compare their own lives to Tom's experiences.**

## Introducing the Novel

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

- Salt Water is the winner of which award?
- Where and when is the story set?
- Who is the book mainly about?
- Does the main character's family have much money? Explain your answer.
- What adjectives does the author use to describe the main character?
- In what ways would not being able to read or write affect your life?
- How do you know that this novel is based on a true story?

**Teacher reads Chapter 1 (pp. 11- 18) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.**

## Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 11- 18)

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- How many brothers and sisters does Tom have? Name them.
- Where are Tom's parents going and for how long? How does Tom feel about being left in charge?
- What does Tom's father do? How long has Tom been working with him? Why does Ted work so hard?
- Why does Tom suggest to his siblings that they have a picnic?

### Discussion

- Tom is only 14 years-old and has been left in charge of his family for a week. Would this happen today? Why/why not? What challenges do you think he will face?
- What are your first impressions of Ted and Kohi?
- What do we learn about Tom's lifestyle in Chapter 1?

**Students read Chapters 2- 13 (pp. 19- 126) independently before the next shared session.**

## Comprehension Chapters 2- 13 (pp. 19- 126)

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- Where is "the beach"? Who owns the farm? Why are the Pook children allowed access to the land?
- Describe the family's day at the beach.

- What terrible sound does Tom hear while he is outside collecting wood? How does he feel as he runs towards the sound? What does he discover when he reaches his sister?
- What bedtime story does Mary tell her brothers and sisters?
- Why is the house such a mess when the Pooks get up in the morning? Why do all of the children need to get dressed up in their best clothes? Why does Tom shout at Rina? What does he learn about his sister's whereabouts from Frankie? What lie does Tosti make up to tell aunt Beryl?
- How are the Pook children regarded by the other people at church? Why do you think Reverend Lovejoy doesn't really approve of the Pook family?
- How does Beryl convince the Pooks to come back to her house for tea? How does Billy alert Beryl to the fact that Rina is missing? What promise does Beryl make Tosti make? Why do you think Mary tells Tosti not to tell Tom that Beryl knows Marina is missing?
- Who approaches Tom on horseback while he is searching for Rina?
- What does Clara tell Tom about Rina? How does she help him with his search? Where does he find Rina?
- How did Marina hurt her foot? Who is Andrew and what happened to him? Why is Tom so relieved to see Clara waiting for them when they come out of the bush? Why is Tom so reluctant to accept help from others?
- Why is Tom so surprised when Clara asks him what he wants to do?
- Why doesn't Tom want to invite Miles and Clara into the house?
- Why does Tom insist that Tosti help him set the flounder nets in the afternoon?
- Who is in charge of the "school boat"? What problems does the fog cause in winter? Describe the children's school. Why do they receive a "patchy" education at best?
- How does Jimmy know that Rina was missing? Why does Frankie decide to tell him the whole story?
- How does Tom ensure that everything is in order for when his parents arrive home? Why is he so eager for everything to be perfect?
- Why is everyone looking forward to the Regatta so much?
- What does Tosti tell Ted happened to the chickens? Why does Tom tell his father that nothing else happened while he was away?
- How do Tosti and Tom help their father? Who approaches them while they are out on the boat? What does he tell Ted? Why does Tom believe that it is too late to confess to what has happened?
- How does Ted punish his sons for lying? What does he make Tom do when they arrive home? Why does Tom talk back to his father? Why do the other children find Ted's reaction to the outburst confusing?
- How does Tom know that his father is angry at him?

- What will Kohi sell at the Regatta?
- Why does Tom kill Andrew? Is his decision justified? Why/why not?
- How does Tom end up in the water? Why can't he get back to the surface? How does he feel when he realises that he is trapped? How does Ted respond to his son's plight? What does this suggest about his character?
- How will the Arizona be put to use during the regatta?
- Why doesn't Jack want to leave school? Why does he think that something has to change soon?
- What does Ted give Tom and Tosti for the Regatta which surprises them?
- In what ways is the river different on Regatta day? Describe what the Pook family see when they arrive at the wharf at Pahi. Who saves Kohi a spot for her table? What events and activities are there for the kids? What does Tom decide to spend his money on?

### Discussion

- Describe Tom's life in 1921. How is it different from your life today? What modern conveniences would you miss the most and why?
- What evidence is there in the novel that suggests the Pook family are not well-off?
- During the 1920's there were clearly defined roles for men and women. Use information provided in this novel to explain these roles.
- Describe Miles. How does he treat Tom? Why does he treat him like this? How does Clara's behaviour differ from her brother's?
- Describe Ted Pook. How does he treat Tom? How does he make Tom feel? Is his treatment of his son fair? Why/why not?
- Predict what will happen next in the novel.

**Students read Chapters 14- 24 (pp. 127- 220) independently before the next shared session.**

### Comprehension Chapters 14- 24 (pp. 127- 220)

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- Why is Tom so embarrassed when he sees Miles and Clara? What race is Miles planning on entering?
- Why is everyone so excited to see the bi-plane?
- Who suggests that Tom take Clara to see the fortune teller? What does the fortune teller say to Clara? Why is Clara disappointed? What does she say to Tom? How does Tom feel after he hears this prediction?
- How does Clara help out Tom's family? What does Ted do when he meets Clara that is surprising? How does this make Tom feel?

- Who does Tosti come in the hundred-yard dash?
- Why does Tosti feel worried as he watches the horses and their riders get ready for the race? Who does he bet on to win? Where is Miles' horse superior? Where does Kuki's horse excel? Why do the horses have so much difficulty when they get out of the water? What happens during the race that horrifies the crowd? What does the fact that Miles abandons the race to go and help the riders suggest about his character?
- How does Tom react when Wiremu says that Tom's dad is a "hard Man"? Why does he react like this?
- What is the "dead-house"?
- Where does Tom find Jack? Why does he give him a growling? Where does Tom find Tosti? What plan does Tom concoct to ensure that Ted doesn't notice the state that Jack and Tosti are in?
- Why is Ted so happy after the regatta? He believes that his children "did him proud"? What does attribute his children's good behaviour to? How would he feel if he knew the truth?
- Why does Tom agree with Jack when he says that Clara "wouldn't touch him with a barge-pole"?
- Why is Tom so determined to stay out despite the weather? Why does he decide to go to Pouto?
- What do the boys see as they stand on the beach? How do the boys react? Why does Tom insist that Jack stay on the beach?
- Describe how Tom saves the people from drowning. What difficulties does he encounter as he tries to carry out the rescues? What do his actions suggest about his character? Why does Tom decide to leave immediately after he confirms that everyone is safe?
- How does Ted react when he hears about his son's heroic actions?
- Why does Ted open Tom's letter from the Marine Department? What is contained within it?
- How does Tom feel when he learns that his father has already cashed his cheque? Who sticks up for Tom? Do you agree with Ted when he says "this is a family and what this family earns, this family shares"? Why/ why not?
- What does Mary say to Tom to try and make him feel better?
- How does Tom convince Ted to let him and Tosti off at the beach? Why is Tom surprised when Tosti and Miles walk off together?
- How does Clara react to Tom's idea of getting a job in Auckland? How did Clara interpret the fortune teller's reading? Why does this make Tom feel so much better?
- Why does Tom feel so embarrassed when he makes his way to the lighthouse? What idea does Stan come up with during Tom's visit? How

does Tom feel about this suggestion? Why is it so hard for Tom to ask Stan for help?

- What favour does Tom ask Mrs Jensen? How does she react to his request?
- How long does Tom have to wait for his letter? How does Tosti react when he learns that Tom might be leaving him? Why does he feel so sorry for himself?
- What plan do Tosti and Tom come up with for breaking the news to the rest of the family?
- What does Ted do when Tom tells him that he is taking the job on the Matai? Why do you think Ted reacts this way? Who does he try and blame for his son's behaviour? How do you think Tom feels when he stands up to his father?
- How does Kohi feel about Tom's news?
- What does Ted give Tom the morning that he is due to leave? Why is Tom so surprised by this gesture?
- What is contained in Tom's reference? How do you think Tom feels reading what his father has said about him?
- Who does Tom find it hardest to say goodbye to? What does Kohi give him as he is leaving?
- What does Tom give Miles to give to Clara?

### Discussion

- What responsibilities does Tom have? How does Ted react if Tom doesn't fulfil all of these? Is this fair? Why/why not? How do Tom's brothers and sisters often make his job more difficult?
- Identify the climax of the story. Why is this event important?
- Describe Tom's relationship with his father. Does their relationship change as the story progresses? Explain your answer.
- Ted Pook is an interesting character because he often behaves in a contradictory way. Write a paragraph describing him. Use quotes and examples from the text to back up your ideas.
- What challenges does Tom face in the story? How does he overcome them? What lessons do you think he learns from his experiences?
- Identify a main theme in the novel. How is this theme developed by the author?

## Activities

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

**Newspaper front page** - Design a newspaper front page. Remember to include a banner headline, feature articles, illustrations and advertisements that are in keeping with the 1920's setting for the book. The main news article should be about Tom's rescue of the people aboard the Matai.

**Writing** - Write an epilogue for the story that explains what Tom's first year working aboard the Matai was like.

**Research** - Conduct a research assignment about an aspect of life in New Zealand in the 1920's. Formulate focussing questions. Present your findings in a report, on a poster or as an oral presentation.

**Letter** - Write a letter to a friend explaining what you liked about Salt Water and why they should read it.

**Paragraph** - Write a paragraph explaining the differences between life in New Zealand in the 1920's and today.

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

**Character** - Choose 5 items that are important to Tom and explain why he couldn't do without them.

**Static Image** - Design a web page advertising Salt River. 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.

**Character** - Write at least two paragraphs about Tom'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.

Notes written by Vicki Ladd