

Sinking

Author: David Hill

Synopsis

Conrad is determined to make it into the National swimming squad. He is busy training. His early mornings are taken up swimming and most afternoons he runs. One morning on his way to training Conrad is accosted by a strange old man who jumps out of the bushes and says weird, frightening things to him. Before Conrad can tell anyone what has happened he learns that the man is Bex's grandfather, George Abbott. Bex is the new girl at school. Her grandfather is suffering from the early stages of Alzheimer's and Bex begs Conrad not to tell anyone about him. But George's problem soon becomes common knowledge when he is seen by locals down at the river yelling. Later, the police are even called as the confused man is found wandering aimlessly in a distressed state.

According to Bex, George doesn't have Alzheimer's. Since the death of his wife George has been having episodes where he becomes confused and wanders off. He is drawn to the river where years ago his friend Ted drowned. Conrad is determined to help Bex, who he finds both annoying and intriguing. What he doesn't realise is that getting involved in her family problems causes complications for him. In fact, by trying to solve the mystery of George's obsession with the river, he is even putting his own life in danger.

Text Type

Sinking is the latest novel written by acclaimed New Zealand author David Hill. Suitable for readers aged 10+ the novel will appeal equally to both boys and girls. The story is fast-paced and contains enough excitement to keep even the most reluctant reader engaged

Set in New Zealand, the story is told from first person point of view by the main character Conrad. Conrad is a competitive swimmer who is training hard to make the National Team. Aside from his intensive training, Conrad's life is fairly typical. He goes to school, hangs out with friends and argues with his sister. However, his ordinary life becomes suddenly more interesting when he meets Bex and her strange grandfather. Conrad is drawn to Bex, who he sees as a strong, confident and capable, yet vulnerable girl. He's often irritated by her, yet he feels protective towards her and is determined to help her with George.

Themes in the novel include working hard to achieve success, the importance of family, loyalty and friendship, bullying, growing up and the fact that the past often affects the future.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapters 1-2 (pp. 5-15), Chapters 3-16 (pp. 16-91) and Chapters 17-27 (pp. 92-175).

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas in the novel. Have them study the setting and make predictions about the nature of the mystery surrounding the river. Encourage students to study the characters of Conrad and Bex and examine how they develop and change as the novel progresses. Wherever possible have students link Conrad's experiences with their own lives and broader understanding of the world. Students should identify important themes and issues raised in the novel and explain how these are developed by the author.

Introducing the Novel

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

- What sort of feelings does the image on the front of the book evoke?
- Who is the main character in the novel?
- Why do you think the crazy old man jumps out of the bushes at Conrad?
- What do you think the grim secret might be?

Teacher reads Chapters 1-2 (pp. 5-15) aloud. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension Chapters 1-2 (pp. 5-15)

- Why does Conrad have to get up so early in the morning?
- What swimming team is Conrad hoping to make? Who is his coach? How does she make training interesting?
- Who else trains early in the morning?
- What is Conrad's favourite part of getting to the Aquatic centre?
- Describe the man who stumbles out of the bushes. How does Conrad react when the man rushes up to him? Why doesn't he end up telling anyone about the incident? How does the incident affect his performance at training?
- Why doesn't Conrad like Finn Wilson?
- How does Conrad recognise the girl that he sees on the way home? Who is with her?

Discussion

- Who is the narrator of the story? What is the effect of the first person point of view?
- Who do you think Ted is? What do you think the old man might be sorry about?
- What do you think Conrad will do now that he knows where the old man lives?

Students read Chapters 3-16 (pp. 16-91) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 3-16 (16-91)

- How does the man seem different to Conrad? How does he know he doesn't recognise him?
- What is the strange girl's name? Describe Conrad's conversation with her. How does Conrad feel after this conversation?
- Why does Bex yell at Conrad at the training track?
- What does Bex ask Conrad not to do? Why does he agree?
- What is wrong with Ted?
- Why is the Te Horo River so dangerous? What sort of trouble occurred there?
- What does Conrad ask his dad about Jubilee Park?
- What does Conrad see Finn do when he goes for a run by the river? How does Bex react towards Finn? What does Conrad notice about the old man's face as he looks at the river?
- What nagging thought in Conrad's head suddenly pops to the front of his mind?
- Why does Conrad feel let down by Jaz?
- Why does Conrad feel compelled to tell Bex that Finn wasn't with him and Jaz? Why does her reaction to this statement annoy him?
- How does Bex react to Conrad's questions about her grandfather? What happens that makes her laugh?
- Why doesn't Bex know if her grandfather is the person yelling down by the river?
- What does Bex's mother do? When is she arriving to help Bex with her grandfather?
- How does Bex react when Conrad mentions Finn's name? How does the tone of their conversation change after this?
- What does Conrad's dad tell him about Jubilee Park?
- Why is Conrad surprised when he talks to Bex's grandfather?
- What does Conrad's dad tell him about the two boys in Jubilee Park?
- Why is Bex so aggressive towards Finn? What does Finn say that makes Conrad stick up for Bex? How does Bex get back at Finn?
- Why does Conrad worry about Bex shaming Finn?
- Why did Marina give up swimming? What does the fish tattoo represent?

- How does Conrad know that Mr Abbott is in the bushes? What is the old man doing? Who does he think Bex is when she approaches him?
- Why does Conrad worry about keeping Bex's secret?
- What does Bronte tell Conrad when she gets home from the stables? What warning does she give him?
- What does Conrad's dad tell him about George Abbott?
- What was the coroner's verdict about the drowning? What was the name of the man who drowned?
- Why is Conrad surprised at Bronte's reaction to keeping the news about George a secret?
- Describe the altercation that Conrad witnesses between Bex, Finn and his friends. Why does Conrad try and intervene?
- Why doesn't Conrad want anyone to see him and Bex together? Why do you think he agrees to walk home with her?
- Why does Bex think that her grandfather is getting worse?
- How does Bex react when Conrad tells her what his father has found out about George?
- Why does Bex want Conrad to talk to George? Why does Conrad agree?
- Why is George so easy to talk to?
- What does Conrad find confusing about George?
- How does George react when Conrad mentions Cook Street School? Why do you think he reacts like this?

Discussion

- What reasons can you come up with for Bex's aggressive attitude towards Conrad?
- What does the fact that Conrad is willing to respect Bex's wishes suggest about his character? What evidence is there in the text to suggest that Conrad is an empathetic person?
- What does it take to be successful in a sport?
- What does Mr Abbott keep apologising for?
- What affect does Mr Abbott's illness have on Bex?
- Describe Bex. What qualities and characteristics does she possess? What does Conrad admire about her?
- What do you think is going to happen in the story next?

Students read Chapters 17-27 (pp. 92-175) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 17-92 (pp. 92-175)

- Why does Conrad think that Finn is like two different people?
- When did George's strange behaviour begin?
- Why is Conrad inspired when he sees Bex riding Hopie?
- Why does Bex call Conrad? Why is Conrad surprised by Bronte's reaction to the call?
- What does Conrad see when he arrives at Bex's house? What has George been doing to upset people? What does Conrad tell Marina about George?
- Why is Conrad so worried about Bex?
- How does Conrad know that his family are proud of how he is dealing with Bex?
- Why is George grateful to Conrad?
- What does Conrad talk to Bex about on the way to the stables? Why is he surprised by her reaction?
- What does Bex reveal to Conrad about Ted and George?
- In what way is Bex different when she is around Hopie?
- Describe the argument that occurs between Bex, Conrad, Finn and his mates on the way home. Why do you think Finn likes to make nasty comments to Bex?
- What does Conrad see spray painted outside Bex's house? Who does he think is responsible? How does this make him feel?
- How does Bex conceal the graffiti?
- Why does Conrad convince Bex not to confront Finn immediately?
- How does Finn react when Conrad tells him what was written on the footpath? Why does Conrad suspect that he knows who's responsible? What does Finn mean when he says "he'll have a word"?
- What does Finn say to Conrad that suggests he is trying to stop his mates tormenting Bex?
- Why does Conrad think that Bex must be scared every time she goes home? How is George when they get to his house? Why does Conrad have the feeling that he is trying to tell him something?
- What conflicting emotions does Conrad see crossing George's face?

- Why does George want Conrad to come back to the house after Bex leaves? Why is George worried about Bex?
- What does the letter make George realise?
- How does Conrad know that Finn didn't write the letter? Describe the conversation that the boys have at the pools. Why does Conrad think that Finn trusts him?
- Why is Bex so upset at the racecourse? What has George left behind that makes Bex think he is going to kill himself? Why Bex convinced that George has gone to the river?
- Describe Conrad's experience riding Hopie down to the river.
- Where does Bex find her grandad?
- What is George's reason for going to the river?
- How do the boys at the river get into trouble? Who jumps in to try and rescue them?
- Why is it so difficult to rescue the kids? How does Conrad and Finn's experience help them? Who helps Conrad with the boy?
- Who rescues the girl? What happens after he rescues her? Why does Conrad think he is at peace?
- How does Conrad convince Bex to stop fighting him?
- Describe the aftermath of the rescue. Why doesn't Conrad feel like a hero?
- What news does Marina give Bex later that night? How does Bex react to this news?
- Describe Bex's reunion with her mother. Why does Conrad decide to go to school and leave them alone to talk?
- How does Conrad know that Bronte is proud of him?
- Who is Finn sitting with at school? Why does this surprise Finn?
- What does Finn say to Conrad that suggests he is trying to make amends?
- Where does Conrad say goodbye to George? What does George's family plan to do with his ashes? Why is this appropriate?
- What do Bex and her mother plan to do in the future? How does Conrad feel about this?

Discussion

- What evidence is there in the text that Conrad is growing up?
- In what ways is Conrad a good friend to Bex?
- George is an old man. Why do you think he jumps in river to try and rescue the kids? What does this suggest about his character?

- What do you think Conrad learns from his experiences?
- Identify the climax of the story. Why is this event important?

Activities

Character – Complete a character profile for a main character in the novel. Include information about their name, age and role in the story. Explain the challenges that they face during the story and how they overcome them. Discuss how this character develops and changes throughout the course of the story. Use adjectives to describe what qualities and characteristics they possess. Include important quotes that reveal important aspects of the character.

Writing – Write a news article about an important event that occurs in the story. A good one would be the dramatic rescue down at the Te Horo River. Include a catchy headline to grab the attention of the reader. Remember to use the inverted pyramid style of writing and include the 5 Ws and H in the first two paragraphs of your article. In the rest of your article develop your ideas more fully and include quotes from people involved in the event.

Static Image – Design a static image that depicts an important theme from the novel. You may wish to do a collage that uses important words and images from the story or you could design a web page.

Writing – Write a letter to a friend explaining to them why they should read *Sinking*.

Drama – Choose an important event from the story. Write a script that depicts the event. Remember to include a cast of characters and stage directions in your script. Practise your play and present it to the class.

Plot – Design a story board that illustrates 10 important events from the novel in the order that they occur. Under each picture write a brief summary of what is happening.

Plot – Choose an important event from the story and explain how this event affected the outcome of the story. If this event didn't happen, how would things have turned out differently?

Notes written by Vicki Ladd