

Dog Tucker

Author: K. Drinkwater

Synopsis

Devlin has had a very hard life. He is only thirteen years old and has already been shunted in and out of foster homes and different schools. His own mother can't look after him. She is constantly in and out of bad relationships - some of them violent. Because of this Devlin and his brothers and sisters have to live in a range of foster homes. All of this upheaval has left Devlin angry and defiant. He feels like he's unwanted and runs away from his foster home.

He is then placed with a relative called Uncle George, who lives on a farm. Uncle George is a gruff man who has experienced his own hardships in life with the accidental death of his wife and son. Devlin is unimpressed with life on the farm and his George's no-nonsense approach to parenting. He decides to run away from the daily chores and lessons, but this proves harder than expected when a series of mishaps thwart his attempts.

Devlin then meets a horse who he calls Zak, after his little brother. Zak is about to be made into horse tucker and Devlin rescues him from certain death. Devlin immediately forms a close bond with Zak because he feels like they have something in common - they are both unwanted. He sets about training his horse and is surprised to see that Zak has a lot of talent. He takes Zak to the races and unwittingly becomes embroiled in a devious scam that involves race fixing and a lot of money.

On top of all of this Devlin has to face a huge tragedy that will change his life forever. He needs love and support from Uncle George, but can he trust him? So many people have let him down in the past. Dog Tucker is a story about making choices and discovering hope.

Text Type

Dog Tucker is a gritty and realistic novel written by New Zealand author K. Drinkwater. The story is set in Auckland and rural New Zealand. Written in colloquial language the novel is easy to read and will appeal particularly to boys. Devlin is a credible character who some readers will be able to relate to. He has had a very difficult life and feels angry and resentful towards everyone - even those who are trying to help him. Because he has been let down so much in the

past he has trouble trusting people. He has a troubled relationship with his mother, who he loves but feels let down by. He feels like his mother puts her boyfriend in front of him and his brothers and sisters. He can't understand why his mother lets men treat her the way they do. When his mother is beaten to death by her current partner it is both tragic and inevitable. Devlin's life is changed forever and he needs to lean on George for support. He chooses to place his trust in George, despite his bad experiences in the past. Through living with George and learning to love Zak Devlin learns to make good choices and discovers that even during hard times there is hope for the future.

Themes include family, a sense of belonging, trust, hope and the importance of making good decisions.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapter 1 (pp. 5- 19), Chapters 2- 9 (pp.21- 133) and Chapters 10- 15 (pp. 135- 236).

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. Have them make inferences and predictions about what will happen next in the story. Students should discuss the effect of the third person narrative and track the development of the main character Devlin, explaining how he changes as the story progresses. Have students identify the main themes in the story and how they are developed by the author. Wherever possible have students relate Devlin's adventures to their own experiences and discuss his relationships with other characters.

Introducing the Novel

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

- Why is the story called Dog Tucker?
- Describe the picture of the boy on the front cover. Who do you think he is? What does the picture suggest about him?
- What does the front cover suggest about the setting of the book?
- Why is the main character in the novel described as "angry and defiant"?
- Why do you think the photograph on the back cover has been included?
- What do you think the deception referred to in the blurb might be about?

Teacher reads Chapter 1 (pp. 5- 19) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 5- 19)

- Why is Devlin bullied at school? How does Devlin react to the continual taunts? What causes Devlin to trash the classroom after Jimmy leaves the room? Is Devlin's behaviour justified? Why/ why not?
- Who comes to pick Devlin up from school? How does she react to the news that he is in trouble?
- What does Auntie Rose find when she picks up Devlin's bag? Why do you think Devlin stole from his classmates?
- What is Devlin's worst fear?
- Why can't Devlin live with his mum? How does this make him feel?
- Why does Devlin have so much trouble trusting people?
- Why does Aroha think that George would be a perfect candidate to take Devlin? How long has he been alone for? What reservations does George have about taking Devlin on?
- What does Allan say when George tells him about Devlin?
- How does Devlin feel about being suspended from school?
- Why does Devlin decide to run away from his foster-aunt's house? Why is his rock collection so important to him?
- Who is Greg? Why does Devlin hate him so much?
- How does Devlin feel once he leaves his foster-aunt's house? What happens to him when he comes across the street kids?

Discussion

- Have you ever been a victim of bullying? How did this make you feel? What is the best way to deal with a bully?
- What do you think motivates Devlin's behaviour? How does he feel about his situation? Can you relate to his experiences? Why/why not?
- What do we find out about Devlin and his family in this chapter? How does not having a father affect him?
- Predict what will happen in the novel next.

Students read Chapters 2- 9 (pp. 21- 133) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 2- 9 (pp. 21- 133)

- What does George discover when he calls Aroha?
- Why do you think George doesn't go to the races any more? Why does Allan want him to go?
- What tragedy has George had to deal with? How long ago did this happen?
- Who finds Devlin in the morning? How does she convince Devlin to come with her?
- How does Devlin feel when Aroha tells him that George wants him to live with him?
- Why is Aroha concerned when Devlin falls asleep in the car?
- What is Devlin's first impression of George? Why does he feel stubbornness rising up inside himself? What aspects of George's house does Devlin find unsatisfactory? Why does he feel so out of place there?
- What emotions does Devlin feel as he watches Aroha leave?
- What chores does George expect Devlin to do?
- Why is Devlin unable to escape on his first night at George's?
- Describe Devlin's first morning on the farm.
- How does Devlin react when George suggests that he gets started on his lessons? What does George do when Devlin defies him? What choice does he give him?
- How does Devlin get injured? How does George react when he realises that Devlin is alright? Who rescues the horse?
- What kind of horse is Betty? What is she trained to do?
- Where does Devlin plan to go after he runs away?
- What stops Devlin from being able to escape from George's house?
- How does George get Devlin out of bed in the morning?
- Who finds Devlin's shoe on the driveway? How does George react when he sees it?
- What happens when Devlin attempts to run away for the third time? Do you think George put the plants there on purpose? Why/why not? How does George react when he finds Devlin outside? Why do you think George doesn't mention the incident to Devlin?
- Why does Devlin decide to escape through the bush? What happens to him? How does George feel when he realises that Devlin has run away?
- How does George know where Devlin has gone? Why does George get so upset when he reaches the ravine? Where does he find Devlin? What does he believe the pair has in common?
- What does Devlin tell Aroha on the phone? Do you think he has given the farm a fair go? Why/why not?

- How does Allan convince George to bring Devlin to the trots?
- How does Devlin behave when he, George and Allan arrive at the trots? Why do you think he acts like this? What does Devlin overhear while he is dozing in the truck?
- Why is the owner of the light red horse determined to get rid of it? Why does Devlin feel a strong connection with the horse?
- What does Devlin ask George to buy him as a pet? Why do you think George agrees?
- Who is Saraia? What offer does she make Devlin?
- What does Devlin do differently the day after he gets his horse?
- Who does Aroha bring with her to visit Devlin?
- What does Devlin decide to name his horse?
- Why does Devlin decide to remain at the farm?
- How does Devlin feel as he watches his brother being driven away? What decision does he reach about his future? How does George react when Devlin tells him about his goal? What incentive does he come up with?
- How does Devlin feel about his first school lesson with George? How does George help put him at ease?
- What does Devlin learn to do with Zak? How does he feel about the prospect of driving his horse?
- Why does Devlin find lessons with George better than lessons at school?
- What exciting news does Aroha give Devlin on the phone?
- Why does Devlin feel grateful towards Zak after he rides him?
- What does Devlin plan to do with Zak next week?
- How has Devlin's life focus changed since he has been living with George?

Discussion

- In what ways has Devlin's unstable past affected him? Why would it be so difficult constantly moving and changing schools?
- Describe George. How does he treat Devlin? What does he have to offer Devlin that he has been lacking?
- What aspects of life on the farm does Devlin enjoy? What doesn't he like?
- Why does Devlin have such a low opinion of himself and his ability to learn?
- Why is it so important to have a goal or a sense of purpose in life?
- Predict what will happen next in the story.

Students read Chapters 10- 15 (pp. 135- 236) before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 10- 15 (pp. 135- 246)

- What does Devlin do for Friday's lesson? Why is this such a disaster? Who saves the day?
- Why does George agree to take Devlin to the races again?
- How is Devlin's second visit to the races different to his first?
- What is unusual about the race that Saraia wins on Smooth Buttercup?
- Describe Devlin's reunion with his family. How does Devlin feel when he sees his mother? Why does he suddenly become aware of how much he has changed?
- What does Devlin see when his mother's sunglasses fall off her face? What does he think happened to her? Why does Devlin's mother cry?
- How does George comfort Devlin when his family leaves? What realisation does Devlin come to about George at this moment?
- Describe Devlin's first ride on Zak. How is it different to sitting in the sulky? Why won't George let Devlin ride Zak on the beach?
- What does Devlin notice about Zak after he has been riding him for a few weeks? Why does this make him feel so good?
- Why doesn't George want Devlin to ride Zak on the beach in the weekend?
- Why does Devlin ask George if he is still able to race horses?
- How does Zak behave when Devlin takes him out of the paddock? What does George do to calm the horse down?
- How does Devlin feel when he gallops down the beach with Zak?
- What shocking news does Aroha give Devlin when he arrives home from the picnic? How does Devlin react to the news?
- What does Devlin do every time he exercises Zak after his mother's death? How do his brothers and sisters react when they come to visit him at the farm? Why does Aroha believe that it is important for Devlin to visit his siblings at their new houses?
- What does Allan tell Devlin about Saraia and George? What does Devlin say to Saraia that makes her cry?
- What does Devlin overhear Saraia and George talking about? How does Devlin react to this information?
- How does Devlin get hurt? How did Zak save his life? Why is Devlin so angry with George when he wakes up? How did Devlin misunderstand what he heard? How does Devlin feel when he learns that George has applied for his trainer's licence?
- Describe Devlin's reunion with Zak.
- What present does Devlin receive at George and Saraia's wedding?

- Who does Devlin stay with while George and Saraia are away on their honeymoon? Why is the girls' car egi ver looking forward to Devlin's visit?
- How has Tracy been affected by her mother's death? How is Devlin able to help his sister?
- Why does Devlin feel apprehensive about returning to the farm? What advice does Alec give to Devlin?
- How does Devlin feel the night before Zak's practice race? Why is Zak's performance at the track so important?
- What happens to Saraia when she is racing Smooth Buttercup? Who offers to drive Zak in his race?
- Why does Devlin decide to follow Gallion? What does he overhear Gallion talking to the strange man about? Why does he feel so anxious after he sneaks away?
- How does Devlin ensure that Gallion can't ride Zak in the race?
- Why does Devlin decide to race Zak himself? Does he make the right decision? Why/why not? What are some of the possible things that could go wrong with his plan?
- What does Devlin do on the track to try and make himself look professional? What position does he get himself into? What is the outcome of the race?
- How does Allan react when he realises that Devlin drove Zak in the race? How does George react?
- What happens when the officials realise that Devlin doesn't have a licence to race? What does Devlin tell the officials in the inquiry room? Why are the officials so interested in Devlin's story?
- Why do Allan and George laugh on the way home?
- Who turns up unexpectedly to see Devlin? What does he want Devlin to do? Why doesn't Devlin want to go with him?
- What great news do Saraia and George share with Devlin when he tells them his decision?

Discussion

- Describe the changes that Devlin goes through after he starts living with George. What is reason for these changes?
- Describe Devlin's relationship with George. Why do you think Devlin is able to trust George?
- What effect does his mother's death have on Devlin? What lessons do you think can be learnt from this tragedy? What positives come out of this tragedy?
- Identify the main idea or theme in the novel. How is this idea developed by the author?

Activities

Plot - Complete a plot graph for Dog Tucker. Label the vertical axis "Level of Excitement". Label the horizontal axis "Events". List 15 important events that occur in the story on the horizontal axis. Plot each event on the graph according to its level of excitement. Identify the climax of the story.

Poem - Write a poem about how Devlin feels when he is riding or driving Zak. Use poetic language features such as metaphors and personification to create imagery.

Writing - Rewrite a Chapter in the novel from a different character's point of view.

Static Image - Design a poster advertising Dog Tucker that could be displayed in the library. Remember, your poster should encourage people to read the novel. Combine verbal and visual features to convey your ideas.

Character - Write several paragraphs that explain Devlin's character in the novel. What challenges does he face? How does he overcome them? What qualities and characteristics does he have? How does he develop and change as the novel progresses?

Theme - Complete a collage that illustrates an important theme from the story. Use words and images from the novel to convey your ideas.

Review - Write a book review for Dog Tucker. Include a brief plot summary and information about the characters. Comment on the themes that are presented by the author. Remember to include your personal opinion about the book and explain why you would or wouldn't recommend it to others to read.

Diary Entry - Imagine that you are Devlin and have just received the news that your mother has died. Write a diary entry explaining your thoughts and feelings.

Setting - Write a paragraph that describes the setting of the story. Discuss time, place and social climate.

Notes written by Vicki Williams