

My NZ Story – Lighthouse Family

Author: Philippa Werry

Synopsis

Frances lives a unique life on a remote lighthouse station with her family. Luckily for her there are several other families on the island and one of them has a daughter called Violet, who is her best friend. But lighthouse families are often moved around and Violet and her family leave for another post. A new family arrives and suddenly Frances finds herself the only young girl on the island. As far as Frances is concerned, this is a terrible position to be in. Now that Violet is gone, who will she talk to and play with?

Things go from bad to worse when Frances's mother has to return to the mainland because she is pregnant. Suddenly Frances is thrust into her mother's role. She begins to realise that being a mother is a huge responsibility. She has younger brothers for whom she needs to cook and clean, as well as helping with their lessons. Her father is still working in the lighthouse so she also needs to ensure that his meals are prepared and his clothes are clean and mended. It is the 1940s and Frances has no modern conveniences to help her with her work. In addition to this, Frances is becoming increasingly worried about the war. The Japanese have invaded Singapore and bombed Darwin. Will New Zealand be next? Frances is sure that she saw a submarine in the ocean - or did she? Is the island a safe place to be?

Text Type

Lighthouse Family is the latest novel in the hugely popular My New Zealand Story series. Written by talented author Philippa Werry, the novel is set in coastal New Zealand and provides readers with an intimate look at life on a lighthouse station. Set in 1941–42, the story of Frances's life is set against the back drop of World War II and the threat of a Japanese invasion.

The story is told in first person from Frances's point of view, so the reader gets to know all her intimate thoughts and feelings. The novel is set out in diary form, detailing the day-to-day activities of Frances's unusual life on a remote island. Students will find this story fascinating because Frances and the other families on the island don't have all the things that we take for granted today. Firstly, they have only each other to talk to and interact with. There is no school and no movie theatre, no shops and no swimming pools. All of the children's lessons are completed by correspondence. Basic supplies are shipped in, so the island's inhabitants need to be very self-sufficient. There are no doctors on the island so it can be extremely dangerous if there is a health emergency. Frances needs to run her household without the help of any modern conveniences such as fridges and washing machines. The role of women is still very much as a housewife and child-bearer, although things are slowly changing now that women are taking on traditional male roles as the men fight in the war.

This novel will appeal to both genders, but particularly girls, as the main protagonist deals with issues that are easily relatable. *Lighthouse Family*, while fictional, provides a historically accurate account of life in the past.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: pp. 11–28, pp. 29–94, pp. 95–167 and pp. 168–211.

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. Have them make predictions about what will happen next. Encourage students to compare their lives today with Frances's life in 1941–42. Have students study the main character of Frances and explain how she develops and changes as the novel progresses. It is important to make sure that students have a good understanding of World War II so that they appreciate the setting and context of the story.

Introducing the Novel

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

- Where and when is the story set?
- What is a lighthouse station? What are lighthouses used for?
- What does the word “remote” mean?
- Why does World War II seem “scarily close”?
- Who is the story about?
- What do you think happens that makes life harder for everybody?

Read the Historical Note on page 213 and study the pictures.

- Why were people worried in 1942 that Japan was planning to invade New Zealand? What precautions were taken?
- What was confirmed about submarines in New Zealand after the war?
- What damage do the Japanese midget subs cause in Sydney Harbour?
- What happened to the third midget sub?
- Summarise the interesting facts provided about Japanese in New Zealand.
- Why are New Zealand lighthouses different to those in other countries?
- Who was Mary Jane Bennett?
- When was the last manned station in New Zealand automated?

Teacher reads pp. 11–28 aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension pp. 11–28

- How many families live on the island?
- What is Boat day? Why is it such a big occasion on the island?
- Who are Frances's brothers?
- Who is Frances's sister? Why doesn't she live with the rest of the family?
- What chores does Frances do at home?
- Who is Frances's best friend? Why have they been inseparable lately?
- Where is the Halfway Viewpoint? Why do Frances and Violet like going there?
- How many houses are there on the island? What other buildings are there?
- Why can't Mr Wallace leave the island?
- Which war do Violet and Frances talk about? Why is it hard to believe there is a war going on when they are on the island?
- Why does Violet hope that there is a school on the new island?
- How many children in Frances's family?
- Why are lighthouse families moved around regularly? Why are some stations not very popular?
- What are the two versions of Boat Day?
- Who is Douglas?
- Who is the Health Nurse? How do the children react to her arrival? Why do they react like this?
- What does Frances notice about Laura as she comes ashore?
- Who are Bill and Walter? What is their role on the island?
- How many stations have Frances and her family lived on?

Discussion

- What do you think it would be like living on an island with only a small number of people to talk to? Frances's family has always lived on lighthouse stations and they have to move all the time. Would you like this lifestyle? Why/why not?

- What do we find out about Frances's life on the island in this section of the book?
- What do you think is going to happen in the story next?

Students read pp. 29–94 independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension pp. 29–94

- What news does the Captain of the ship usually bring on Boat Day?
- What was special about the Matai? What is the Matai being used for now?
- What does the Captain tell the adults about the Japanese? Why is everyone shocked by this news? Why don't the adults want the children overhearing their conversation?
- What do Bill and Walter keep in their hut that fascinates Stephen?
- What do Laura and Frances always do on her first day back on the island?
- In what way is Stephen different from the other children? What talents does he have? What difficulties does he face?
- Why does Frances's mum refuse to send Stephen to a special school?
- Why doesn't the nurse want Frances using sign language with Stephen? Why do Frances's parents argue after the nurse leaves?
- Why is Frances so glad that she doesn't go to boarding school like Laura?
- What news does Laura give Frances after Violet and her brothers go home?
- Where does Frances's mother go to have her babies?
- What do Laura and Frances learn about their mother from Aunt Jean?
- Why does Frances's mother need to be very careful in her condition?
- Why do the Japanese pose a real threat to New Zealand?
- What does the light from the lighthouse look like out at sea? How does it help ships to navigate?
- In what ways has the war affected life on the island?
- What does Frances's dad tell the children to do if they see a mine?
- How much money do you get for finding a mine at sea?
- What is radar?
- How do Frances and her family celebrate Christmas on the island?

- What will Frances's dad do to the light in the lighthouse if the Japanese invade? Why will he do this?
- What news do the families on the island receive on the 30th December?
- Why does Frances feel awkward and clumsy next to Laura?
- How can Laura's grandmother afford to pay for her to attend boarding school?
- What are Frances's two New Year's resolutions for 1942?
- Where is Douglas off too next? Why do people only stay there for a short period of time?
- What news do the Wallaces bring about the war?
- What two events overshadow Frances's summer?
- Why does it take the people on the island so long to get information? Why does Frances's father read the newspapers in reverse order? How are the papers delivered?
- What terrible news does the newspaper contain?
- Why does Walter record all of the sighting of boats and planes?
- How does Frances try and allay Stephen's fears about the Japanese?
- Where do Frances, Violet and their siblings go camping? What supplies do they take with them? What plans do the boys make in anticipation of a Japanese invasion?

Discussion

- What is Frances allowed to do by her parents on the island that they probably wouldn't let her do on the mainland?
- Describe Frances's relationship with Stephen. Why does she try and protect him from stories about the war?
- In what ways has Laura changed since she has been away?
- What does Frances like about town? What doesn't she like about it?
- What do you think will happen next?

Students read pp. 95–167 independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension pp. 95–167

- Why does Frances lie awake while the others sleep in the tents?
- Why does Violet insist that they abandon camp early in the morning?
- How do the grown-ups react when Violet tells them what she saw?

- What does Violet give Frances as a going away present?
- Why is Boat Day even busier when it is Moving Day? Why is it so difficult getting things on and off the boat?
- Why does finding Violet's "Saving Our Island" book upset Frances so much?
- How many children do the new family have? How does Frances feel about being the only girl among six boys?
- What news do Mr and Mrs McKenzie bring about the war? Why does Frances begin to see the lighthouse as a "beacon attracting danger"?
- In what ways does Frances try and help her mother?
- Why does Frances devise an escape plan? What does she realise about babies after she finishes her plan? Why is Frances's escape plan so complicated?
- Why do you think Frances worries the most at night?
- Who does Frances bump into on her early morning walk? Why does this annoy her?
- How are the McKenzie family different to Frances's family?
- What is the only job that Frances wants to do? Why can't she do it? What does she consider her only alternative to be?
- What happens if you fall asleep on lighthouse duty?
- Why does the lighthouse need to be painted constantly?
- What is Frances's big fear?
- What does Frances overhear the men painting the lighthouse talking about? How does this make her feel?
- What news does Frances find out about the mainland from Aunt Jean's letter?
- What are the families on the island doing to help the war effort?
- Why does Mrs McKenzie want the children to bring seaweed back for her?
- What book does Mrs Wallace give Frances to read? Why do you think Frances won't take her up on her offer of choosing a book from Mrs McKenzie's house?
- What is Frances's favourite spot on the island? How does she feel when she sees Hugh sitting there? What does the fact Hugh realises he is "trespassing" suggest about his character?
- What does Hugh ask Frances about Stephen? What does Frances realise when she answers him? What does Hugh say that annoys Frances?

- What is disappearing from Frances's house? When Stephen starts disappearing also, what realisation does Frances come to? Why does Frances feel helpless when she tries to reassure Stephen that the Japanese won't come?
- Where does Frances find Stephen when she follows him? Why do you think she promises not to tell anyone what she has seen?
- Why does Frances's dad want her mother to leave the island? Why doesn't her mother want to go?
- How does Frances feel when her father says that she will look after the house in her mother's absence? What will she be responsible for?
- Why do you think the letters from Stan Wallace are censored?
- What do the families on the island do during the storm?
- Why doesn't Frances's dad want to be Principal Keeper?
- How does Frances feel when she thinks the baby is coming early? Who does she go to for help?
- How does Mrs McKenzie react when Frances comes to her for help? Why does her reaction make Frances feel better?
- How does Frances's dad get her mother into town so quickly?
- How does Frances's life change after her mother leaves?
- Why does Frances christen the coal range Mussolini? What is the worst part of using the coal range?
- Why does Frances give up her lessons?
- Why doesn't Frances want to ask either of the other women on the island for help?
- Why does being in charge help Frances to develop a new appreciation for her mother? What does her mother do in addition to the tasks Frances is doing? Why does Frances find looking after the family so depressing?
- Why do you think Frances's dad turns down Mrs McKenzie's dinner invitation? What does Hugh bring over for her? Why does the fact that Hugh offers to help her make Frances feel worse?

Discussion

- In what ways does the war affect Frances's life on the island? What do you think it would be like worrying about being invaded?
- Discuss the role of women and men in the 1940s. Why do you think women weren't allowed to be lighthouse keepers? How have things changed in the 21st century?

- Why is it so important for everyone living on the island to get along?
- What are some of the disadvantages of living on the island?
- Why does it take Frances so long to complete all of her jobs? What modern conveniences does she do without?

Students read pp. 168–211 independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension pp. 168–211

- Why does the rain make things difficult for Frances?
- How does Frances feel when Mrs McKenzie invites the boys over to play?
- Why does everyone look at Frances when Ben asks if Max will have a birthday party? Why does she agree?
- What does Frances find in the kitchen when she returns from the washhouse?
- Who offers to make Max's birthday cake? What does Frances decide to make instead? Why is Max's birthday party such a success?
- What does Frances start reading to the boys at night? How does she know they are interested in it? Why do you think Frances changes her mind about borrowing a book from Mrs Wallace?
- What happens to Frances on May 20th that upsets her? Why does this event make her miss her mother so much? Why is Frances grateful to Laura?
- Why does Frances begin to change her mind about Hugh?
- What does Hugh want to do when he grows up?
- What noise wakes Frances up on the 24th of May?
- Who does Frances share the experience of watching the whales with? Why does she feel like crying?
- Why is Hugh suspicious of the plane that flies overhead?
- What are pulled from the bottom of Sydney Harbour on June 5th? Why do the boys think this news is so exciting?
- How do Bill and Walter find out the information about the war? How does the news of what is happening in Australia make Frances feel?
- What kinds of things is Laura collecting to help the war effort?

- What have the children at Laura’s school been given in case they are bombed? How effective do you think these will be?
- Why is Frances so grateful that no one in the household has been sick?
- Where does Stephen disappear to in the middle of the storm? Who helps Frances find him?
- Why does Hugh tell Stephen that he won’t need his hideout anymore? How does his news make Frances feel?
- When is Frances’s mum’s baby born?
- Why is everybody relieved when Frances’s mum returns home?
- What does Ben want to do when he grows up? Why is Frances so happy about this?
- Why does Frances’s mother let her choose the baby’s name? What does Frances decide to call her?
- Why is Frances surprised when she finds out that Stephan wants to attend the School for the Deaf?
- What does Frances notice about the city that is different?
- Describe the School for the Deaf in Titirangi. Why do you think it is important for Stephan to be around other children like him?

Discussion

- What advantages do the islanders have over the mainlanders during the war?
- What are ration books? Why were they issued?
- What does Frances miss the most about her “old” life when her mother leaves? How does her experience change her?
- Identify a main theme in the novel. Explain how this theme is developed by the author.
- Is war ever justified? Why/why not? What realisation does Frances come to about the Japanese soldiers when she sees the American soldiers in town?

Activities

Research – Choose an interesting aspect of World War II to conduct a research assignment on. You may want to research Hitler, the concentration camps or Japan’s involvement. Formulate focussing questions, come up with possible sources of information and record the research process. Present your information as a poster, in an essay or in a speech.

Plot – Choose 10 important events that occur in the story. Draw a flow diagram that lists the events in the order that they occur.

Character – Draw a picture of Frances on a large piece of paper. On one side of the paper list all of her positive characteristics and qualities. On the other side list her negative characteristics. Include quotes and evidence from the story to back up your ideas.

Theme – Many important themes and ideas are raised in this novel. Choose one theme and design a collage that depicts this theme. Include a quote from the story to help reveal your theme.

Letter – Write a letter to a friend explaining why this is an important novel to read.

Review – Write a book review suitable for publication in a school newspaper. Include a brief summary of Lighthouse Family. Explain the importance of the setting in the story and describe the main characters. Include information about the main themes and ideas presented in the story and give your personal opinion about the book.

Character – Write a paragraph about how Frances's character develops and changes throughout the course of the book.

Poster – Design a poster advertising the novel for your school library. Remember to combine verbal and visual features to convey your ideas. Include illustrations and images from the text to make your poster appealing and encourage others to read the book.

Contrasts – Draw 2 columns on a piece of A4 paper. Label one side 1942 and the other present day. Include in the first list things that Frances had and activities that she did in 1942, and then compare them with the things you have and do today.

Notes written by Vicki Ladd