

# Project Huia

## Author: Des Hunt

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### Synopsis

Logan has travelled to Ashhurst with his grandfather Jim, who may well be the last person to see a huia alive in Te Apiti gorge, forty years after they were considered extinct. Jim has been contacted by Ana from the Te Whare Putaiao o Manawatu Institute. Ana is in charge of Project Huia and is passionate about confirming Jim's sighting and maybe even gathering DNA from the dead bird's body. Wanting to make sure that she doesn't miss any of the details of Jim's story, Ana gives him an MP3 recorder and Jim records himself as he tells his story to Logan. What unfolds is a fascinating tale of adventure, jinxes, danger and family unity. Jim and his sister Mavis aren't the only ones looking for the last huia. The Carsons, the town's notorious bullies, are determined to kill the huia and sell it to be stuffed. Jim and Mavis are desperate to save the huia, which they have named Olivia. Tragically, before either of the groups can reach her, Olivia is killed by magpies. What follows is a frantic race to find her body. Fearing the consequences of returning to town with the dead bird, Mavis and Jim decide to hide the body inside the train tunnel. Now, forty years later, all Ana, Logan and Jim need to do is find it again. But how accurate is Jim's memory of events after all this time?

### Text Type

*Project Huia* is a fast-paced, adrenaline-pumping adventure with broad appeal for boys and girls. Set in New Zealand in the present day, the story switches between past and present as Jim tells his story to his grandson Logan. Through Jim's recordings the reader is transported back in time to Jim's childhood adventures with his sister Mavis. Jim and Mavis are determined and courageous youngsters with a strong sense of right and wrong. Their motivation for finding and photographing the huia is to provide evidence that they still exist and hopefully encourage an expedition to find them. On the other hand, the Carsons want only to profit from the huia.

The novel raises many important environmental and ethical issues including the importance of conservation and the eradication of foreign pests in New Zealand.

### Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapter 1 (pp. 7–20), Chapters 2–10 (pp. 21–97), Chapters 11–19 (pp. 98–181) and Chapters 20–31 (pp. 182–289).

During the shared sessions encourage students to make inferences and predictions about the text. Have them ask questions to clarify any words or ideas they are unsure about. Wherever possible have students relate the events that occur in the novel to their own experiences and broader understanding. Encourage students to think critically by having them identify important issues raised in the text and apply them to their own world.

## Introducing the Novel

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

- What is a huia? What do you know about them?
- Why do you think the novel is called *Project Huia*?
- Who are the main characters in the novel? What mystery are they attempting to unravel?
- What challenges do the main characters face during their quest?

Teacher reads Chapter 1 (pp. 7–20) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

## Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 7–20)

- Who are the three passengers on the plane? What are they looking for?
- How has the area changed in the last seventy years? Why is Logan a bit disappointed?
- What does Te Apiti mean?
- Why does Jim begin to get frustrated during the flight?
- Why does Jim believe that the place is jinxed? What happens when the helicopter pilot looks for a place to land?
- Why does the helicopter follow the motorbike? How does Damon “give him some of his own back”? Why is it impossible to identify the driver?

## Discussion

- What impression does the author create about Ana in this chapter?
- Why is it so dangerous to point a powerful laser at a helicopter or plane in flight? What sort of person do you think would do this?
- What do you think will happen in the story next?

Students read Chapters 2–10 (pp. 21–97) independently before the next shared session.

## Comprehension Chapters 2–10 (pp. 21–97)

- Why can't Damon land in the gorge? Why is it dangerous to walk through the tunnels?
- What are Ana and Jim arguing about when Logan returns to them in the car park?
- Why is Project Huia so important to Ana?
- What does Logan say that eases the tension?
- Why is it important that Ana organise the trip quickly?

- Why does Ana give Jim the MP3 player?
- How does Jim know that the huia arrived in springtime?
- How old was Jim when he saw the huia? What year was it? What “daily reminders” remain of the Second World War?
- Who are Mavis and Paul?
- What is happening to the huia when Mavis and Jim first see it? Why are they worried that the huia might be killed? Why is the huia’s beak an ineffective weapon?
- Why does Jim describe the huia as a clumsy flier?
- What does Jim’s father do for a living?
- How does Jim know that the huia he saw was a female?
- Why does Jim’s father decide to keep the discovery of the huia a secret?
- Why do Jim and Mavis go to Crawly Creek? How do they attract the huia? How do they know that they are in her preferred environment?
- What happens to the huia when the tuis attack it? How does Jim feel when he sees the huia escape to the bush?
- What does Jim call the huia?
- Why don’t Mavis or Jim tell their parents where they are planning on going? What gear do they take with them?
- Why are Mavis and Jim determined to go through the tunnel? What do they decide to use?
- Why is the jigger difficult to use? What happens when Jim and Mavis are halfway through the tunnel? Why doesn’t Jim feel relieved when they exit the tunnel?
- Why is it so important to capture a photograph of Olivia? Why does Mavis find it hard to get a good photo of her? What happens to scare Olivia away?
- Describe what happens in the tunnel when Mavis hears a train coming.
- Why does Ana want to go for a drive in the car?
- Why is Jim adamant that he can’t change his flights?
- Who are the Carsons? Why does Jim think they are evil? Why does John push Paul off his bike?
- Why do Russell and John approach Jim, Mavis and Paul as they are leaving school on Wednesday?

- How do Russell and John know about the huia? Why do Daniel and Russell chase Jim on the motorbike? How do they catch him? Why is Daniel angry after he looks at the photos?
- How does Jim solve the mystery of the missing photos?
- Who requires proof of the huia's existence before they will mount an expedition?
- Why does Jim tell his father that he and Mavis went through the tunnel? How does his father react to this news? Why doesn't Jim tell him about the Carsons?
- What does Jim's dad plan to ask Jason Whitely for?
- Why is Jim's dad so happy when he arrives home with the fish and chips?
- Why can't Jim's dad join them on the expedition? Why does he decide that it's safe for them to go alone?
- Describe Jim and Mavis's second expedition to find the huia. Who turns up to spy on them? Why is Jim concerned about their presence?
- What does Logan find out about lasers when he does some research?
- Why is Ana so determined to find out where the huia came from?
- Why does Ana become angry during their trip into Ashhurst?
- As Ana sees it, why were reserves set up?
- What does Mop-Up stand for? What is the hardest mammal to eradicate?
- Why is Ana angry when she realises that the bird that made the loud shrieking noise is a cockatoo?

## Discussion

- Why are Jim and Mavis determined to find evidence of the huia's existence?
- What do we find out about Jim as a youngster in this section of the book?
- Do you believe in jinxes? Why/why not?
- Why does Jim dislike the Carsons so much? Why do you think all of the kids in the family are the same?
- Why is Ana angry with the politicians? Do you agree with her point of view? Why/why not?
- What environmental issues are raised in this part of the novel?
- Make a prediction about what will happen next.

Students read Chapters 11–19 (pp. 98–181) independently before the next shared session.

## Comprehension Chapters 11–19 (pp. 98–181)

- Why is it difficult to control the parrot population?
- Why does Jim stare at the man who enters the pub?
- Who is buried in the Ashhurst cemetery?
- What do Logan and Ana discover when they catch up to Jim in the trees? How does Logan stick up for his grandfather? Why do the boys listen to Ana?
- Why do the boys accost Jim? How does Ana convince them to give her their names? How does Jim know Daniel's name?
- How did Daniel's grandfather die? Why do the Carsons hate the Whitakers? How does Daniel demonstrate this hatred to Jim?
- What do Ana, Logan and Jim discover when they get back to their car?
- Why does Logan ring his grandmother that night?
- Why do you think Jim decides to stop telling his story about the huia?
- What does Ana show Jim and Logan at the Institute? What does she teach them about the huia during their visit?
- Describe the clean room. Why is it so important that nobody touches anything with their bare hands in this room? How does Jim react when Ana tries to find a suit that fits him? Why does he react like this?
- What does Jim do that night that frightens Logan? Why does Logan become despondent after this episode?
- What good news does Grandma give Logan in the morning? How does Jim react to this news?
- Why is Jim's dad convinced that the Carsons won't follow him again?
- What extra gear does Jim take on this trip?
- What do Mavis and Jim discover when they reach the first tunnel?
- Describe Mavis and Jim's walk through the tunnel. What is the worst part?
- What conclusion do Mavis and Jim come to when they see the Jigger on the other side of the tunnel?
- Why do Mavis and Jim think that Daniel has killed Olivia? How does this make Jim feel? When do they realise that Olivia is still alive?
- What do Jim and Mavis plan to do with Olivia if they find her? Why does Mavis have difficulty carrying out their plan?

- What do Daniel and Russell plan to do with the huia? How does Mavis save Olivia from them?
- How does Olivia die? How does Jim feel when he realises that the last huia is dead?
- Why don't Jim and Mavis take the jigger through the tunnel? Describe their journey through the tunnel. What do Mavis and Jim do when the train comes through? What causes the train to use the emergency stop? Why is Mavis so concerned about the police getting involved?
- Why do Mavis and Jim decide to hide Olivia's body? Where do they hide her?
- How does Ana react when she learns that Jim has finished telling his story?
- Why do Ana and Logan go out to the gorge? What does Ana discover when she finds the monument Jim mentioned? What aspects of the gorge does Logan recognise from Jim's story?
- What parts of the gorge are not at all like how Jim described them? What other inconsistencies has Ana noticed? Why does Ana begin to doubt Jim's story? How does Logan feel when Ana suggests that Jim might be lying?
- Why are Ana and Logan so concerned when they see the motorbike leaning against the picnic table? Where does Logan find the boy with the laser? How does he manage to get the laser out of his hand? Who rescues Logan when the boy tries to throw him over the railing?
- Who is the boy in the blue sweatshirt? Why does Logan believe that he is truly evil?

### Discussion

- Why do you think Jim was there when Daniel died?
- What qualities and attributes does Jim exhibit when he is young? Does he still have these today? Use evidence from the text to back up your answer.
- In what way did a fashion trend contribute to the demise of the huia?
- What does Logan's willingness to risk his own safety to stop Danny from lasering the train suggest about his character?
- What do you think will happen in the story next?

Students read Chapters 20–31 (pp. 182–289) independently before the next shared session.

### Comprehension Chapters 20–31 (pp. 182–289)

- Why isn't Logan able to recover the laser?
- What does Logan discover about Mavis at the cemetery? Why does Ana think her death might be related to the events surrounding the huia?

- What valuable new information do Ana and Logan provide Constable Sinclair about the laserings? What will happen to Danny when Constable Sinclair catches up with him?
- What reason does Jim give Logan for not returning to the tunnel until now?
- Describe the altercation between Jim and Keith Carson. What does Daniel accuse Jim of doing?
- What information does Ana provide that sheds new information on the altercation?
- How does Keith react when he learns that Jim is going out to the gorge? Why does he think that he is entitled to the remains of the huia?
- Why does Logan think that they haven't heard the last of the Carsons?
- Why does Logan think Ana is lying about fixing the jinx?
- How do Ana, Logan and Jim get into the gorge?
- In what ways have the tunnels changed since the 1940's? Why does Logan feel uneasy when the van moves away?
- Why does being near the tunnel feel like being in a different century to Logan? How does Jim feel about going back into the tunnel?
- What do you think Ana means when she says "we're going to bring her back alive"?
- Why does Logan become increasingly certain that they are looking for Olivia in the wrong place? What realisation does he come to after he and Ana search the tunnel for the second time?
- Describe what happens when the van comes to pick Ana, Logan and Jim up. How does Logan rescue his grandfather? Why does Logan think it was a miracle that he survived the accident?
- How does Logan discover where Olivia is hidden? Why does he have difficulty retrieving the package?
- Why does Colin suggest that they wait in a siding loop before returning?
- What does Jim tell the others about Daniel and Russell while they wait? What were the two boys charged with? What injuries did Daniel sustain? Why weren't Mavis and Jim linked to the accident?
- What does Keith Carson do when he finds the group waiting in the van? Who calls the police? Why does Keith think that the driver was trying to contact them? How does Logan ensure that the police know their exact location?
- Why can't Daniel hear the train approaching? What happens to the Ute after the train hits it? Why isn't Daniel hurt?

- What do the police decide to charge Keith with?
- What does Jim tell Logan about why he never returned to retrieve the huia? How was Jim injured? What happened to Russell?
- How did Mavis die? Why didn't Jim get the chance to say goodbye to her?
- Why is the huia so valuable to Ana?
- What news does Constable Sinclair give Logan about Daniel Carson?
- What alerts Logan to the danger outside the Institute? Why does Ana drop the chilly bin? How does Logan prevent Daniel from getting away? What disaster befalls the tearaway?
- Who puts out the fire? Why can't Logan extinguish the chilli bin initially?
- What causes Logan to pass out?
- Why is Logan in two minds about Danny Carson? Where did he escape from?
- Who takes the chilly bin into the white room? How do Jenny and Ana get into it?
- What is Logan's impression of the clean room? What sorts of things does Ana do in there?
- What does Ana see on the x-ray that upsets her? What does she accuse Jim of doing? How does he react to this accusation?
- Why is removing Olivia from the oilskin such painstaking work? Describe the atmosphere in the room as this is being done.
- How does Logan feel about his grandfather's honour and integrity being questioned?
- Why is Logan surprised when Olivia is unwrapped? Why are Ana and Jim so emotional?
- Why is Ana so happy with the condition of the huia?
- What realisation does Logan come to about the pellet? What happens to Jim when Ana proves Logan's theory?
- What are the oval shapes inside Olivia?
- What is the principal goal of Project Huia? How does Ana plan to use Olivia to reach this goal? Why is it ironic that Ana plans to use magpie eggs?
- What does Logan take to Mavis's grave? What is significant about his choice of flowers? Why do you think Jim thanks Logan for making him visit Mavis's grave?
- What does Logan decide to do when he leaves school?

### Discussion

- What heroic qualities does Logan possess?
- Identify the climax in the story. Why is this event important?

- Does Daniel deserve what happens to him? Why/why not?
- What lessons do you think Logan has learnt from his experiences?

## Activities

**Research** – Conduct a research assignment on huia. Formulate open-ended questions to guide your research. Use a range of visual, oral and written sources to gather your information. Present your findings on a poster, as a report or in a speech.

**Debate** – Conduct a whole class debate on the topic “New Zealand should get rid of all its introduced predators and create a land where the native animals would once again thrive”.

**Letter** – Write a letter to the author explaining why you enjoyed reading his book and what it taught you.

**Issues** – Did anything in the story make you change your mind about something? If you did, what was it in the story that caused it and why?

**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.

**Review** – Write a book review for *Project Huia*. Include information about what kind of book it is and what it is about. Describe the issues raised in the story and explain why they are important. Write about Jim and the challenges that he faces. Describe the effect of the story alternating between the past and the present. Remember to include your personal opinion about the novel.

**Conflict** – Identify an important conflict that occurs in the novel. Explain why the conflict occurs and how it is resolved. Back up your ideas with quotes from the text.

**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.