

# Title: The Red Poppy

## Author: David Hill

## Illustrator: Fifi Colston

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### Synopsis

Jim McLeod is a young New Zealand soldier fighting on the Western Front. When he writes to his mother and sister he downplays the horrors of war, not wanting to upset them. But Jim is scared. In thirty minutes he will need to leave his deep trench and advance on the enemy. He knows the Germans will try and kill him and he might need to kill them. At 6am the men pick up wooden ladders and climb out of the trenches. Jim is out in the open and advancing towards the enemy. All around him his comrades are falling.

Suddenly Jim feels like he has been hit by a club. He looks down and sees that a bullet has hit his rifle and sent it slamming into his arm. His arm is broken and he is in agony. Stumbling forward Jim makes his way to a deep hole in the ground. He is shocked when he realises that a German soldier is also lying in the hole. The German soldier is injured also. Realising that the soldier can do him no harm Jim uses his own bandage to stem the flow of blood from his wound. Stuck together in the hole the pair forge a strange friendship, despite their language difficulties. Jim learns that the man's name is Karl. When Nipper the message dog happens upon the two men it is Karl who comes up with the idea of putting a poppy in the dog's message pouch so that they can be found and rescued by Jim's comrades. Through this experience Jim learns that his enemy is not really his enemy, rather he is a frightened young man just like Jim.

### Text Type

The Red Poppy is an illustrated text that deals with New Zealand's involvement in the terrible battles of the Western Front. While the story is written for young readers, it deals with serious themes that easily lend themselves to discussion with older students.

Written by acclaimed New Zealand author David Hill, The Red Poppy tells the story of Jim, a frightened young man who is involved in the campaign on the Western Front. Jim is surrounded by death and destruction and has to endure terrible conditions in the trenches surrounded by mud and rats. He knows that he might have to kill the enemy and this makes him uneasy. When Jim is in the trench with Karl he begins to realise that he is not the enemy after all – just a frightened young man like himself. In the middle of a raging battle humanity and compassion reveal themselves when the two men comfort each other and work together to save their lives.

The red poppy is an important symbol in the text because it represents hope in the midst of chaos. Through his periscope Jim can see a patch of red poppies that the shells have missed. When Jim finds his way into the hole he initially believes that the red blotches on his shirt are blood, but when the German soldier holds up a red poppy he realises that they are just poppy petals. The two men

laugh over his misunderstanding and a bond is formed. It is Karl who comes up with the idea of including a poppy with Nipper's message so that they can be found easily.

The red poppy is used every ANZAC day to commemorate fallen comrades and veterans around the world for their sacrifice. The red poppy was chosen as a symbol because it used to grow in parts of the Western Front, where the story is set.

The Red Poppy is beautifully illustrated by Fifi Colston using chalk pastel, oil paint and Photoshop. The dark and muted colours used help emphasise the horrors of war. The only bright spots in the book are provided by the red poppy, the symbol of hope.

The Red Poppy also comes with a CD of the song 'Little Red Poppy' written by Rob Kennedy.

## Sharing the Novel

The story can easily be read in one sitting and would work really well if read aloud.

## Introducing the Novel

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

- Who is the book about?
- When is the story set?
- What is the name of the dog on the front cover? What is his role?
- Why do you think the story is called The Red Poppy?
- Do you know why we give away red poppies on ANZAC day? What do you think they might symbolise?
- How do you think Jim feels while he is in the trenches waiting for the order to attack the enemy?
- What do you think happens when Jim finds himself face-to-face with an enemy soldier?
- Use the internet to find out more about World War I and the role that New Zealand played.

Teacher reads story aloud to students.

## Comprehension

- Who does Jim write to the night before the battle?
- Why is Jim frightened?
- How many soldiers marched through the night? What did they see as they marched?

- What time does the attack begin?
- Who else is in the trench with Jim? What weapons do they have? Why do the rifles have bayonets?
- What does Jim see as he looks out of the trench? How far away are the German soldiers?
- What does Jim see through his periscope?
- What is the name of the messenger dog? Where did the soldiers find him? How does the dog transport messages? What advantages does a dog have over a human?
- Why is Nipper considered to be such a good dog?
- What do some of the men start to do when there is only ten minutes to go before the battle starts?
- Describe what happens before the men leave the trenches. What signal tells them that it is time to climb up the ladders? Why do the soldiers spread out as they advance?
- What is artillery?
- What does Jim see as he moves forward?
- Who are the soldiers in grey uniforms?
- What happens when Jim nears the patch of red poppies? Who does he think about as he begins to crawl forward?
- How does Jim get injured? Where does he crawl to?
- How does Jim feel when he sees the German soldier in the hole? What does he notice about the man?
- Why does Jim go cold with fright? How does the German soldier reassure him? Why does Jim laugh?
- Why does Jim call the man Fritz?
- What does the German think that Jim is going to do when he crawls towards him? What does Jim actually do?
- What is the soldier's name?
- What does Jim think about as he lies in the hole?
- How does Jim feel when Nipper slides down the side of the hole? What does Karl give the dog?
- Who provides the pen and paper for Jim's note? What does Karl give to Jim to put in with the note? Why does he do this?

- What do the two men learn about each other as they lie in the hole?
- Who appears beside the shell hole? What do the soldiers initially do when they see Karl? How do they get Karl out of the hole? What injuries has Jim sustained?
- Why was the poppy such a good idea?
- How do the men treat Karl? Where is he taken when they get him back to camp?
- Why do you think Jim gives Karl the Poppy? What does the handshake shared by the men represent?

## Discussion

- Why do you think Jim doesn't mention anything to his mother and sister about the approaching battle or the conditions in which he lives?
- What are trenches and why were they used during the war?
- In what way do the illustrations in the story help reveal what the war was like?
- Is it ever right to kill people during a war? Justify your answer.
- Why do you think the illustrator has used a bright colour to depict the poppies? What do you think the bright poppies might represent?
- How do you think Jim felt when he left the relative safety of the trench and ran out into the open?
- What impression does the story give you about war? What does Jim see and hear? How does he feel?
- How does the incident where the German soldier held the poppy up to Jim to show him that he wasn't bleeding create a bond between the two men?
- What does Jim's treatment of the injured German soldier suggest about his character?
- What is the significance of the men telling each other their names?
- What does this story illustrate about compassion and humanity? What lesson do you think Jim learns from his experience?

## Activities

**Poetry** – Using words and images from the story write a war poem.

**Research** – Conduct a research assignment about a World War I campaign that New Zealand was involved in. Present your findings as a poster or an oral presentation.

**Writing** – Imagine that you are Jim. Write a diary entry for the night after the incident with the German soldier occurred. Describe what happened – all the things you saw, heard and felt.

**Poster** – Design a poster advertising The Red Poppy that would be suitable for display in your school library.

**Static Image** – Create a poster or collage that illustrates an important theme presented in the story.

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

**Issue** – Choose an important issue raised in the story and create a role play about it.

**Writing** – Write an epilogue for the story a year after the original events took place.

**Issue** – Write a paragraph explaining why this story made you change your mind about an issue.

**Writing** – Write a letter to your school librarian explaining why every school library should have a copy of The Red Poppy.

Notes written by Vicki Ladd