

# Title: When Empire Calls

## Author: Ken Catran

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### Synopsis

It is 1899 and the Boer War has just begun in Africa. The Boer War is the first overseas conflict that New Zealand as a nation is involved in. Young men and women are eager to sign up to help the British Empire. Patriotism sweeps through New Zealand, even reaching small farming communities like Huia.

James McDonald is a teenage boy who lives on a farm in Huia with his parents and brothers and sisters. When his two older brothers sign up James is left to help his father run the farm. Left behind by his brothers and two sisters who are training to be nurses James has to assume extra responsibility and also grow up quickly. The reality of war is illustrated vividly by James' brother Edward in his letters home and James begins to worry that he may never see his brothers alive again.

"Croaky Fred" who owns Fred's Grocery Emporium is a person who believes that war is neither glorious nor justified. He challenges James to question his assumptions and ideas about the war. Fred's outspoken views are considered unpatriotic by many townsfolk, who are unaware that Fred is himself a war hero who knows only too well the horrors of war. Unfortunately for James and his family, Fred's concerns and dire predictions don't turn out to be unfounded...

### Text Type

When Empire Calls is a fascinating historical novel written by award-winning New Zealand author Ken Catran. Set in New Zealand in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the story gives young readers a unique view of what life was like before modern conveniences like fridges, televisions, play stations and cell phones were invented.

Told in first person point of view from the character of James McDonald, the novel gives an interesting insight into life in small town New Zealand during war time. Of particular interest is the spirit of patriotism that sweeps through Huia when war is first declared. Most of the townspeople believe that it is their duty as members of the British Empire to fight for England. They feel that it is honourable to fight and possibly even die for their country. James initially believes the propaganda but his naïve views are challenged by "Croaky Fred", a war veteran who has first-hand experience of the realities of war. Throughout the novel James matures as he faces a number of challenges and faces adversity. Eventually he is able to make up his own mind about war and its effects.

When Empire Calls will appeal particularly to boys and those students interested in history. It is appropriate for students aged 10+. The story is unusual in that it focuses on the Boer war from the viewpoint of those left behind. The character of Fred is useful because he offers a vastly different viewpoint about the war to the majority of the other townspeople. As the story progresses the reader learns that Fred is more than just a grumpy old man. As a decorated war hero he is in a better

position to most to make judgements about the merits of war. An interesting feature of the novel which makes it relatable to students is the parallels drawn by the author between what is happening in Africa and what happened to the Maori in New Zealand during the land wars.

## Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapter 1 (pp. 7–16), Chapters 2–8 (pp. 17–85), Chapters 9–13 (pp. 86–145) and Chapters 14–16 (pp. 146–191).

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 and inferences. Students should compare and contrast James’s life in the early 1900’s with their own lives today. Encourage them to pay particular attention to the main character James and explore how he develops and changes as the story progresses. Students need to identify main themes in the story and examine how these are developed by the author. Ideally students should be developing their understanding of New Zealand history and their own views and opinions about the war.

## Introducing the Novel

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

- Why do you think the novel is called *When Empire Calls*?
- When do you think the novel is set?
- What do you think a “patriotic fervour” might be?
- What do the images on the cover of the book suggest about the genre of the novel?
- Who is the main character in the novel?

Teacher reads Chapter 1 (pp. 7–16) and *New Zealand at War* (pp. 193–206).

## Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 7–16)

- When is the story set? Where does James live?
- Who are Edward and Lionel?
- Where does James always go on Market day? What is Mr Todd’s nickname?
- Who are the Boers? What does the bugle call mean? Why does the British Empire want to teach the Boers “a lesson”?
- Why does Mrs Harbottle organise a dusk patriotic address?
- What does Croaky Fred do to the recruitment sign? Why do you think he does this?

## New Zealand at War (pp. 193–206)

- Why does the author think that we should be interested in the Boer War today?
- What do you think the author means when he says that “nothing happens without consequence”?
- What war followed the Boer War? How many people died during this war?
- Why did World War II happen?
- What are some of the costs of war?
- What is propaganda?
- How did the British Empires eventually defeat the Boers?

## Discussion

- What have we learned about James and his family in the first Chapter?
- Describe Croaky Fred. Why is he considered the rudest man in town?
- Describe the atmosphere in town when James visits. How does listening to the bugle make James feel? What do the majority of the townspeople think about the war?

Students read Chapters 2–8 (pp. 17–85) independently before the next shared session.

## Comprehension Chapters 2–8 (pp. 17–85)

- What does Fred sell in his shop? Why do people respect Fred even though he is rude to everyone? What does James’s mum mean when she says that Fred “lifted his elbow”?
- What does Fred promise to give James if he can explain why the British Empire should make war on the Boer? Why isn’t Fred happy with his answer?
- What does Fred give James in exchange for his work?
- Why isn’t Hemi’s brother Wiremu allowed to enlist?
- How does Fred react when James tells him that he wants to be a bugler? What does he say to James when he hears about the fact that “browns cannot fight against white”?
- What is the secret to playing the bugle?
- How do the horses escape? What damage do they cause in town? How does Fred react to the chaos? Who was rumoured to have opened the stockyard gates?
- What do Edward and Lionel have to provide if they want to fight in the war? What is their main reason for wanting to fight for the Empire?

- What bargain does Lionel make with James when he makes the decision to go to war?
- Why do Kate and Vicky come home? How does Vicky plan to support the war effort?
- How many young men from James's area enlist? Why does James believe that Mr Harbottle doesn't really want to go to Africa?
- On what date was war declared on the Boer?
- What information does James find out from Edward's letter? How does James's dad react when he finds out that James opened the letter? Why do you think he reacts like this?
- What does James forget to tell Hemi and Wiremu when he sees them on the way to town? Why do you think he regrets this later?
- What is a Little Englander? Why does Mrs Harbottle call Fred this?
- Why does Edward say that Mr Harbottle is "not much of an officer"?
- Where are Edward and Lionel shipping out to?
- Why does James like reading Edward's letters so much?
- How does Huia plan to celebrate the turn of the century?
- What does Vicky do that enrages her father? Why do you think she does this?
- What role do Vicky and Kate want to play in the war? Why is James so surprised by how his dad reacts to their arguments? Why does James feel like the "world was upside down"? What decision does James's dad come to about his daughters?
- Why does Hemi's dad refuse to give anything to the people collecting money to build a new statue of the Queen?
- Where does Vicky go to train to be a nurse?
- Why does Frankie Shand return home early? Why do you think the townspeople raised money for him?
- What book does James get for Christmas? Why does he read the book differently from how he would have before? What does James learn from the book?
- How did the horses get injured on the way to Africa? What does Edward reveal about Frankie Shand in his letter to James? How does Edward describe Cape Town Harbour? How does Edward feel when he sees a troop of British Hussars riding back into town?
- How does Fred react when James asks him if he used to be a soldier? Why doesn't Fred think that Spion Kop was a victory? What poem does Fred ask James to read?

### Discussion

- How do the recruiting officers convince young men to enlist?

- Why can't Maori men enlist in the war? Why do you think this policy existed? What is your opinion about this policy?
- How do the people left behind in Huia feel when the boys head off? How will life be different for them?
- It is brave and noble to die for your country? Why/why not?
- Describe Fred's views about the war. Why do you think he holds these views? How do his views differ from those of the majority of the townspeople? Why do you think he challenges James to question his own ideas?
- What role do the media play in a war? How can the media be used to sway public opinion? What does Fred mean when he says "I can't imagine the generals distorting the facts"?
- Predict what will happen next in the story.

Students read Chapters 9–13 (pp. 86–145) independently before the next shared sessions.

### Comprehension Chapters 9–13 (pp. 86–145)

- What message does James get from Southey's poem? How does Fred react when James tells him what he thought of the poem? Why is James so surprised by his reaction?
- What does James find out about camp life in the letter from Edward? What happens to Edward's troop when they are sent on a reconnaissance mission? How many men were killed or wounded in the skirmish? What did the Boers do that surprises Edward? Why doesn't Edward despise the coward? Who does James think the coward might be? Why does he decide not to speak to him when he gets home?
- What does Fred read out from the Valley News that really surprises James?
- Who is the coward? How is he treated by the townspeople when he returns home? Is this treatment justified? Why/why not?
- Who was killed by the sniper? Why is James so surprised that Fred attended his funeral? How does Fred's reaction to the boy's death differ from his reaction to Queen Victoria's death?
- Why does Hemi get caned at school?
- Why do you think Fred is so interested in Edward's letters?
- What does Edward report to James in The Letter? What effect does this news have on James? What does Fred say when James tells him about the letter?
- Why does James have trouble understanding girls?

- Why does the headmaster at James’s school bring the whole class together? Who is punished? What is his punishment?
- How do Edward’s feelings towards Mr Harbottle change as the war progresses?
- What does Captain Harbottle do that makes the troops cheer for him?
- How do the people of Huia react when Lindsay Shaw returns without a leg? Why do they react like this?
- Why is James excited by the news contained in the letter that arrived from Edward in late 1901?
- How did Edward die? How did his father find out the news? What emotions does James feel when he learns that his brother is dead? Why do you think James doesn’t want to read Vicky or Lionel’s letters?
- Why doesn’t James like going into town after the news of Edward’s death spreads?

### Discussion

- What do Edward’s letters suggest about the reality of war? How does Edward’s attitude towards war and his previous notions about the Boer begin to change as he experiences real combat?
- What does Fred mean when he says “people do not know what they can do – until they have to do it”? How does Fred’s attitude towards these so-called cowards differ from James’s?
- How do we know that James is looking back on this time in his life and recounting his experience? What war does James end up fighting in that changes his perception about these previous events?
- What do you think Wiremu might have said to Mr Armitage to get him to stop caning Hemi?
- What parallels are drawn between the Boer war and the New Zealand wars by the author?

Students read Chapters 9–13 (pp. 86–145) independently before the next shared session.

### Comprehension Chapters 9–13 (pp. 86–145)

- Why does James become so angry with Fred? How does he display his anger and hatred? How does he feel after his does this? How was Fred able to sleep through the whole thing?
- What does James’s father say to him when he admits what he has done? How does James know that his father is extremely disappointed in him? How does James know that Fred did actually care about Edward and the things that James said to him? Why doesn’t Fred want James to pay for the damage? How does he suggest that he settle matters?

- How do some of the townspeople react when they learn about what James has done? How does James feel about their reactions?
- Why is James so determined to clean Fred's shop? What does he find in the old biscuit tin? What does Fred give James to read?
- What does James learn about Fred's life from the journal? What insights does his journal give you into the New Zealand wars? How did Fred earn his New Zealand cross? Why isn't he proud of this achievement? Why do you think that Fred doesn't want James to mention his journal to anyone?
- When did the troops come home? Why is James the only one to meet his brother Lionel? What did Mrs Harbottle have planned for their homecoming? What actually happened?
- In what ways has Lionel changed?
- Why do you think Fred pinned his medal on for the soldiers' homecoming?
- What does Lionel do when he gets to Clattery-Cross? Why does he do this?
- What do we learn about James and how his life turned out from the epilogue?

### Discussion

- How does James's character develop and change as the story progresses? What lessons does this experience teach him?
- Describe the character of Fred. How is he misunderstood by others? To what extent do his past experiences explain his behaviour? What kind of effect or influence does Fred have on James?
- What is the author's message?

### Activities

**Research** – Sir James Carroll was a top Maori leader in the early 1900's. His name is mentioned in the story as being an advocate of all New Zealander's fighting together – Maori and Pakeha. Conduct a research assignment on this famous New Zealander. Formulate 4 focussing questions to guide your research. Use a range of oral, written and visual texts to gather your information. Keep a research log to record your steps. Present your information as a poster.

**Editorial** – Imagine that you are a male newspaper editor in 1899 who believes that Maori should be able to fight in the Boer war alongside Pakeha. Write an editorial about this issue. Remember to make your views on this subject very clear!

**Chart** – Complete a chart that shows the things that James's family had in 1899 with the things that your family has today.

**Static Image** – Design a static image that illustrates an important theme or idea from the novel. Use verbal and visual features to convey your idea. Include a written commentary that explains the theme that your static image depicts and the reasons why you chose to display your ideas the way you have.

**Plot** – Design a story board that shows 10 important events from the story in the order that they occur. Under each illustration include a brief description about what is happening.

**Review** – Write a book review for *When Empire Calls*. Include a brief plot summary. Explain the setting and the themes of the story. Include information about the main characters and the style of the book. Remember to include your personal opinion about the novel.

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

**Static Image** – Design a propaganda poster encouraging people to enlist to fight in the Boer war.

Notes written by Vicki Ladd