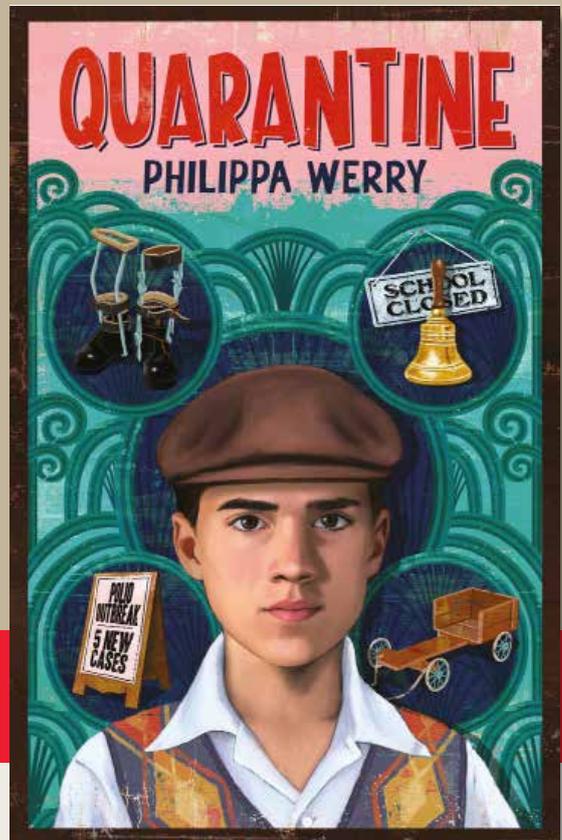


# My New Zealand Story Quarantine

By Philippa Werry

- Reading • Writing • History
- Thinking Skills



## Synopsis

Today polio is an almost forgotten disease, but a hundred years ago, polio epidemics regularly swept the world. This is the story of the 1936/37 polio epidemic in New Zealand. Formerly published by Scholastic as *Enemy at the Gate*, and now brought under the umbrella of the ever-popular My NZ Story series.

Twelve-year-old Tom Mitchell lives in Lyall Bay, Wellington, with his family: mum and dad, older sister Lily, and younger siblings Flo, Johnny and Jessie. His best friend Charlie lives just down the road and the two of them fill their time with building a trolley out of an old pram, having fights with the Freyberg St gang, complaining about school and going down to the beach. Tom is bright and a keen runner, inspired by NZ champion Jack Lovelock, whom he met when Lovelock was touring the country after winning gold at the Berlin Olympics.

One morning, Tom's father notices a paragraph in the newspaper about a polio outbreak in Dunedin. The date is 12 December 1936. Schools close early for the summer. Children are banned from picture theatres, swimming pools or anywhere in crowds. As the epidemic spreads, Tom becomes obsessed with keeping his family safe, carrying out the same routine each night of repeating their names to try and protect them. But it's not enough. One night, Flo is taken to hospital and tests confirm that she has polio. For days, her life hangs in the balance. She survives the initial crisis, but she is paralysed and in hospital for months.

Her illness casts a shadow over everything. Feeling guilty that he can run when Flo can't even walk, Tom loses interest in school and his running. Schools close again for months, with schoolwork printed in the newspapers to be done at home and posted in. Tom's teacher, a WW1 veteran with a limp, is one of the few people who will come near them when they are thrown into quarantine.

Eventually, Flo is able to come home on Sundays and, after eight months, for good, hobbling on crutches and with a withered leg. But life for her and her family can never go back to normal again. Tom has to negotiate new family dynamics, new friendships and the seeming loss of an old one, as he wonders when the epidemic will end, what the future holds for him and Flo and if she will ever make a full recovery.

## About the Author

Philippa Werry lives in Wellington with her family. After university, she worked as a librarian and started writing for the School Journal when the first of her three daughters was born. Philippa has written many stories, plays, poems and articles for the School Journal and other educational publications. She has written eighteen fiction and non-fiction books, and her work has been included in several anthologies. She went to Gallipoli in April 2014 to help at the Anzac Day services with Gallipoli Volunteers. A number of her books deal with New Zealand history, including war, peace and Anzac Day.



# The Story Behind the Book from the Author Philippa Werry

The initial idea for *Quarantine* (formally titled *Enemy at the Gate*) came from my husband's father, Peter Werry. As a child, he lived with his family in Ashburton, where his father was a teacher. When polio broke out, his parents decided that the safest place for Peter and his brother John was with relatives who had a sheep station at Waikononi, two hours' drive away in Peel Forest.

Even today, Peel Forest is quite isolated. Back then, it must have been even more so. Peter and John and their mother stayed on the farm, while their father went back to work, but they didn't stay in the farmhouse. They spent three months camping in a tent in a field, not seeing anybody except their relatives and one other family who came with them.

I think the boys had lots of fun. I don't know how much their mother enjoyed sleeping in a tent and cooking over a primus for three months, but she must have thought it was worth it. In those days, no one knew what caused polio, or how to avoid catching it. There was no cure and parents were terrified that their children would end up sick, paralysed or, at worst, dead.

## Writing Style

Like all of the books in the My New Zealand Story series, *Quarantine* is historical fiction told in the first person. The novel includes front matter of a 'scene setter' and a foreword from the author, comparing the polio epidemic with the public health response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Told in 32 short chapters through the eyes of intelligent, sensitive 12-year-old Tom Mitchell from Wellington, *Quarantine* succeeds as a personal story, a family drama, and a snapshot of a nation in the grip of a public health crisis where the vulnerable are children. The situation in which the Mitchell family find themselves bears real comparison to current Covid-19 restrictions, and many of their concerns, fears, dreams and hopes for a future beyond the epidemic will resonate with today's readers. The cameo of New Zealand Olympic hero Jack Lovelock is both realistic and touching and ties into the themes of personal dreams and goal setting as well as adding to the historical depth of this well-researched story. Themes touched on include personal and public health, restrictions vs freedom, friendship, fear of the unknown, anxiety, resilience, determination, inequality, loyalty, role models, personal dreams and goal setting. Historical notes and photographs at the back of the book add social and historical context and enrich the authenticity of the text.

## Shared Learning and Discussion Points

During the shared sessions, encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of characters and events. Have them make predictions and inferences and relate these to their own experiences or prior knowledge. Read the passages aloud with students reading along in their own copy, or reading by themselves.

### ASK YOUR STUDENTS:

Look at the cover and read the blurb.

- When and where is this story set? How can you tell?
- What is polio? What do you know about it? What does it mean to be in 'quarantine'?
- What do the small pictures on the front cover show?
- Who is the main character in the story?
- What do you think this story might be about? Why do you think that?

### Comprehension questions

- Why did Lily heat the water on the stove to wash the dishes? (Chapter 1, p.7) How is this different to the way we wash dishes today?
- Tom's family has a 'waste not, want not' approach to food. What does this phrase mean and why would it have been a widespread attitude at the time?
- Why do you think Dad said, 'That's right, Tom' when Tom said, 'Washing up is girls' work'. (Chapter 1, p.9)
- What do you notice about the Mitchell children's jobs? How are they the same as your jobs? How are they different?
- Which passage of text on page 11 tells you what Tom's mother thinks about Mrs Wallis Simpson?
- What does the word 'abdicate' mean? (Chapter 1, p.12)
- Review Chapter 1, pp.11–13. It could be said that Lily is a romantic and Mrs Mitchell is a realist. Find passages to support this statement.
- What is 'infantile paralysis'? (Chapter 1, p.14)
- What do you think Tom is going to do with Dad's watch? (Chapter 1, pp.14–15)
- What is 'relief work'? (Chapter 2, p.16) Why do you think Charlie's house was described as 'dim and gloomy inside'? (Chapter 2, p.17)



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- Who is Jack Lovelock? What do you think Tom's secret is? (Chapter 2, p.18)
- Why does Tom have to run? (Chapter 2, p.21)
- What is meant by a 'midnight bunk'? (Chapter 2, p.22)
- What are the modern equivalents to a 'wireless', a 'gramophone', and the 'Art Union lottery'? What is a 'tram'? (Chapter 2, p.25)
- Why is Dad worried about 'travel restrictions'? (Chapter 2, p.28) When are travel restrictions brought in and by whom?
- At the end of Chapter 2, Tom describes the day as 'an ordinary, boring old Saturday that was going to change our lives for ever'. Predict what you think will happen.
- Why does Johnny get 'wheezy and starts to cough if he runs about too much'? Why doesn't Tom have a name for Johnny's condition? (Chapter 3, p.33)
- Why are there no Māori living in Lyall Bay, Wellington at the time? (Chapter 3, p.33) Note: In 1936, the Māori population was 83 per cent rural.
- Why are Tom and Ellen rivals?
- What war had Mr Moffat been in? Why do you think he 'never talked about it'? (Chapter 3, p.36)
- What is meant by going to 'the pictures' and why was it so popular?
- Why is Tom not as excited as the other children about school closing early? (Chapter 4, p.41)
- How do the parents find out about schools closing? How is that different to when schools were closed because of Covid-19? (Chapter 4, p.43)
- Why did Jack go for a run instead of joining in with the cricket game? (Chapter 4, p.45)
- Why do the children have to wear hats and stay out of the sunshine? What is 'health camp' and why do you think Charlie and Emmy were being sent to it? (Chapter 4, p.47)
- Why doesn't Mum want Aunt Edie and Meg coming to stay? (Chapter 4, pp.48–49)
- Why did the librarian ask the children to choose their books quickly and then leave? (Chapter 5, p.53)
- Why did Tom's sweets not taste 'quite as good as usual'? (Chapter 5, p.55)
- Why are Tom's parents particularly worried about infantile paralysis? (Chapter 5, p.57)
- On p.59 (Chapter 5), Flo can't imagine anything worse than not being able to go to the pictures. Why are they so important to her?
- Why has the author used the simile 'like golden syrup being poured out of a can' to describe Jack Lovelock's running? (Chapter 6, p.64)
- How did Tom feel about meeting his hero? (Chapter 6)
- Why is Dad not mad about Tom borrowing his watch without asking? Why does he offer to coach him? (Chapter 6, pp.62–69)
- How do Lily, Tom, Flo and Johnny differ in their opinions about the travel ban on children leaving Dunedin? What does 'fumigated' mean? (Chapter 7, pp.70–71)
- How is Tom's Christmas different to your family Christmas? How is it the same? (Chapter 7, pp.73–74)
- Why is 'They' capitalised in the middle of a sentence? Who is 'They'? (Chapter 8, p.83)
- Tom starts a routine, or ritual, every night to try and protect his family from 'It'. He also starts having bad dreams. What is 'It' and why is Tom having bad dreams? Have you ever felt anxious about something?
- Who is Princess Elizabeth? (Chapter 9, p.89) What is she known as today?
- Why does Mum make jams and preserves in February? (Chapter 10, p.97)
- At the time when *Quarantine* is set (1936–1937), children often went to the beach, pools or picture theatres without adults. Are you allowed to do these things by yourselves? Do you think times have changed? Why do you think that?
- What kind of person is Flo? Find examples in Chapter 10, pages 99–102 to support your opinion.
- Why is the Pied Piper a good analogy, or comparison, for the fear of catching infantile paralysis? (Chapter 11, p.103)
- What does Tom describe as 'the invisible enemy'? (Chapter 11, p.107)
- What does the phrase 'maimed and crippled' mean? (Chapter 11, p.111)
- Why did Tom's family not go to the circus or celebrate Easter?
- What do you think Doctor MacPherson was testing when he ran something 'small and glinting' over the soles of Flo's feet? (Chapter 13, p.121)
- Why doesn't Lily answer Tom? (Chapter 13, p.123)
- Why does Tom lash out at Johnny? (Chapter 14, p.126)
- Have you ever felt like you were in prison or a besieged castle 'with an invisible enemy at the gate'? (Chapter 14, p.129) What did you do to pass the time and make it more enjoyable? What does Tom do? (p.130)
- Tom thinks that it is his fault that Flo has got sick. Is it his fault? Did he 'let the enemy in'? (Chapter 15, p.132)
- Which literary device does the author use when she describes the end of the epidemic as 'like the tail of a dragon, retreating'? (Chapter 15, p.133)
- The 'safe' referred to on p.134 is not the kind of safe that money is kept in. In the past, a safe was used to keep food, such as butter and milk, cool. Why did Tom's family have a safe? Why does Aunt Edie's letter upset Flo?
- While Tom's running may not be helpful in keeping Flo alive, it does achieve something. What is it? (Chapter 15, p.136)



- Why do you think Mr Moffat visits Tom to bring him schoolwork, despite the family being in quarantine? (Chapter 15, p.136) What does it tell you about Mr Moffat? What does Tom mean when he wonders ‘about the different ways there were of being brave?’ (Chapter 15, p.138)
- What is the ‘cure’ for infantile paralysis that Doctor MacPherson refers to? (Chapter 16, p.143)
- Why does Tom feel guilty for being well when Flo is sick? (Chapter 17, p.146)
- Why did the hospital have to burn all of Flo’s belongings? (Chapter 17, pp.151–152)
- Why do you think Ellen Boyle was first in line to shake Tom’s hand and welcome him back to school? Why was Tom not upset that his best friend Charlie was last in line? What does Tom understand about Charlie? (Chapter 18, p.161)
- Why does Charlie give most of his pay to his mother? (Chapter 18, p.162)
- Why did Mr Moffat make Charlie drink the milk, even though he didn’t like it? (Chapter 19, p.165) Why are Vera and Charlie concerned that the milk might have polio ‘germs’ in it? (p.169)
- Why does stern Mr Moffat look anxious? What does Tom understand about Mr Moffat? (Chapter 20, p.175)
- On pages 177–184 of Chapter 21, Tom talks about why he finds it much harder to do his lessons at home than he did at school. Do you agree with Tom? Why/why not?
- Why does Tom sometimes wish that people would talk about Flo but, when they did, he wished that they hadn’t? (Chapter 21, p.179)
- Look up the meaning of ‘inculcate’ in the dictionary or online and write out the definition. If you don’t know the meaning of ‘persistence’ and ‘industry’, look them up as well. Do you think Mr Moffat was right? (Chapter 21, p.188)
- Why is Tom reluctant to go and visit Flo? Once there, why does he want ‘to stay and wave forever’. (Chapter 22, pp.194–196)
- In 1937, young people could leave school at the age of fourteen. Why do you think young people today cannot leave school until they’re 16? Does Lily want to leave school? Why does she think Tom is lucky? (Chapter 23, pp.199–201)
- What happened in London on Coronation Day? Why did people in New Zealand celebrate it? How did Tom show thoughtfulness towards Flo? (Chapter 23, pp.201–202, 206)
- In Chapter 24, p.208 Tom wonders ‘which was worse: never to have been good at something, or to have been the best and then to lose it all?’ What do you think?
- Why is Tom surprised that Mr Moffat is encouraging Ellen Boyle to aim for ‘the legal or medical professions’? (Chapter 24, p.214)
- When Tom discovers that Flo caught polio simply by chance rather than because of anything he did or didn’t do, he feels hugely relieved. (Chapter 25, p.220) How is this similar to catching Covid? How is it different?
- How has ‘real life’ impacted on Lily’s hopes and dreams? (Chapter 24, p.218) Why was Amelia Earhart an inspiration to Lily? (p.221)
- Why do you think Dad ‘was doing quite a lot of overtime’? (Chapter 26, p.222)
- Why does Tom find the first letter from Flo so confronting? (Chapter 26, p.224)
- Flo’s letters make being in hospital ‘sound like fun’ and Tom thinks that ‘the hospital ward often sounded like a much happier place than home’. Do you think that is true or is it more likely to reflect Flo’s personality and positive outlook on life? (Chapter 26, p.226)
- Why does Tom find it difficult to concentrate when he’s sitting next to Ellen Boyle? (Chapter 27, pp.229–230)
- On Flo’s first visit home from hospital Tom says, ‘I didn’t know how they could be so happy to have Flo home, when it wasn’t really Flo at all’. What is Tom struggling with?(Chapter 27, pp.230–234)
- Flo treasures the comic that Tom had reluctantly sent to the hospital earlier in the book. (Chapter 27, p.235) Whose idea had it been to send the comics? How is this an example of foreshadowing?
- What does it mean to be brave? Was Flo brave? (Chapter 27, p.236) Who else in the family shows bravery? Find examples from the text to support your answer.
- Tom ‘just couldn’t understand how Flo could be so uncomplaining’. (Chapter 28, p.238) What is it about Flo that helps her to be resilient?
- On page 110 (Chapter 11) Tom says, ‘I couldn’t wait for the school athletic sports’ but on p.250 (Chapter 29) he says, ‘I didn’t even want to take part’. Why has Tom’s attitude to running changed so completely? What happens to make him want to run again? Whose support was vital to making Tom want to run and win? (pp.256, 258)
- Why is Lily leaving school at fourteen when previously she’d wanted to study and become an engineer? What does she mean when she says, ‘Everything’s changing’? (Chapter 30, pp.259–261)
- How does Tom feel about Charlie leaving without telling him? (Chapter 30, pp.265; Chapter 31, p.267)
- Do you think Molly would have died today? Why/why not? How would you feel if a friend died? (Chapter 30, p.266)
- How has Tom’s relationship with Johnny changed? What has brought about this change?
- What does the appearance of Trevor signify? Why is the discovery that ‘Charlie had wanted to say goodbye, after all’ so important to Tom? (Chapter 32, pp.273–274)
- Why has the author reintroduced Paddy the dog at the end of the story? (Chapter 32, p.276)
- What character trait does Flo possess that has helped her learn to walk again? (Chapter 32, p.278)



- Predict what you think will happen with Tom and Ellen.
- Why do you think the historical note was included at the end of the book? Did it increase your understanding of the novel?
- Why do you think the list of famous people who had polio was included? What character trait do you think they may have shared with Flo?

## Activities

### ACTIVITY 1: BACK IN THE DAY

Step back in time to the 1930s and do online research to find images on some of the following aspects of New Zealand life:

- Polio
- Health camps
- School milk
- Trams
- Shirley Temple cinema posters

Choose your images and make a presentation using Google slides, adding a caption for each image.

### ACTIVITY 2: CREATE ORAL HISTORIES

Some grandparents and many great-grandparents will remember the later polio epidemics and the restrictions that went with them. Ask your older family members if any of them remember having to do schoolwork by correspondence, picture theatres being closed or other restrictions due to polio outbreaks. If they do, interview them about their experiences. Find out what they remember about this time and make video or audio recordings of their memories.

### ACTIVITY 3: YOUR HAPPY PLACE

Tom found his happy place when he was running. Think about what makes you feel happy, particularly during a period of lockdown or isolation. Draw a picture of either Tom in his happy place running or yourself doing what makes you happy.

### ACTIVITY 4: NEVER GIVE UP!

On p.270 (Chapter 31) Mrs Boyle makes the statement, 'Never give up, that's the idea!' Write a paragraph describing how this statement sums up one of the themes of *Quarantine*, using examples from the text to support your ideas.

### ACTIVITY 5: BECOME A BIOGRAPHER

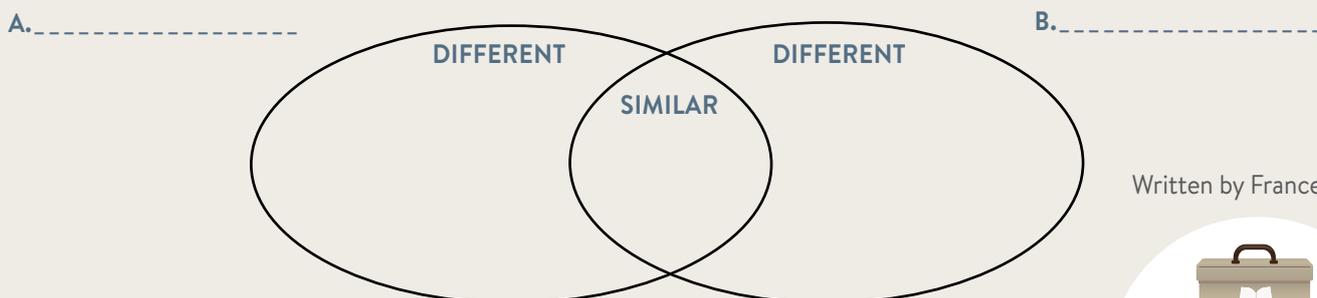
Choose one of the individuals from the list of famous people who had polio and research to learn more about them. Write a short biography on your chosen person that answers the following questions: Where did they grow up? How old were they when they got polio and how did it affect them? What did they become famous for? Did having polio hold them back from fulfilling their dreams?

Alternatively, choose either athlete Jack Lovelock or aviators Amelia Earhart or Jean Batten and research to learn more about them. Write a short biography that answers the following questions: Where did they grow up? What were they famous for? What legacy did they leave behind them?

Famous Kiwis: Consider keeping it local and writing your biography on one of the famous Kiwis: June Opie, Jack Lovelock or Jean Batten.

### ACTIVITY 6: POLIO VS COVID

Use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the restrictions imposed in Aotearoa New Zealand during the polio epidemics versus the restrictions imposed due to Covid-19. What was the same? What was different?



Written by Frances McBeath



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SCHOLASTIC