



Beneath Our Feet

By Jack Hartley

• Reading • Writing • Social Studies • Art

Synopsis

Alfie watches as the city he calls home begins to shake and, within the blink of an eye, comes crashing down around him. In the wake of this tragedy, Alfie receives a second chance at life, finally getting the desperately needed organ for a heart transplant, forever linking Alfie to one of the Christchurch earthquake's many victims.

Dani's diagnosis is not good. She's tough—she already beat cancer once as a child—but she's also smart: she knows that this time there's no escape. She refuses to suffer as her mother did or to put her father through that again.

By chance, or by fate, Alfie and Dani's paths cross in her darkest moment and he goes with her into the sealed-off cordon of Christchurch's red zone as she comes to grips with her diagnosis. Here they discover a world beyond anything they could have ever imagined, a world where time stops. With everything outside the cordon paused still, Dani's cancer no longer grows. She can be free of treatment, free of rules, free of everything around her that is breaking her.

They quickly realise that time can only stop if they're together. Dani needs Alfie. He sees how much pain she is in and he agrees to complete a bucket list with her inside the red zone cordon, if she promises to continue treatment on the outside. As Dani's condition worsens, it becomes clear they need to spend every possible moment inside there, and they set up camp. Isolated from the outside world, the two fall deeply in love, and she's given the chance to live the life that every teenager deserves.

As they reach the last item on her bucket list, time begins catching up, and the forces that have kept the world still for so long begin to weaken. They must leave. On the outside, Dani begins to wither away as the time they had fought off comes fighting back with vengeance. It's now too late for treatment, and Dani is at peace with her decision. She dies in Alfie's arms.

Two years later, as the cordon reopens to the public, Alfie revisits the world that was exclusively theirs for a while, with her father. Here he shows him the mural they made, which tells the story of the life Dani was able to live inside the most broken place. This was her treatment. Better than any drug or therapy.

About the Author

Jack Hartley was born and raised in Christchurch. With his background in psychology and his passion for raising awareness and understanding of mental health issues, Jack uses his literature to tackle the complexities and hardships that teens face as they go through major life events, discover who they are, and feel real love for the first time. Somewhat a rarity as a male YA author, Jack is passionate about accurately capturing the voices and deep emotional lives of young people. Jack published his first YA novel in 2018 called *All the Other Days*.



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Writing Style

Beneath Our Feet is a time-stopping love story written for the 14+ age group. Jack Hartley's debut novel with Scholastic New Zealand is set in Christchurch in the aftermath of the major earthquake of 2011. Being born and bred in Christchurch gives Jack insight as to what it was like to live in the ravaged post-quake city and how the events affected people and their mental health. He dedicates the book to his home of Christchurch.

The book, which is divided into 42 drama-filled chapters, starts with a quote from *The Press* from Wednesday, 23 February 2011 that reads "Our worst day". Each of the chapters is headed up either Alfie or Dani, the two main characters whose love blossoms after a chance meeting outside the hospital. In the Alfie chapters, Alfie tells the story from his perspective. In the Dani chapters, she tells it from hers.

This book explores the themes of teenage love, sickness, mental health issues and losing someone you love to cancer. Not only does teenage Dani have to deal with the complexities of growing up and falling in love for the first time, she also has to navigate the tragedy of facing death at such a young age. Jack's skilful and descriptive writing transports you to the sealed-off cordon in the red zone, a place in which time stops and where Dani's cancer stops too. Jack has written with an authentic believable male voice and one in which YA readers will appreciate the raw and real language. The dialogue between Dani and Alfie captures the humour the pair share and their love and respect for one another.

At the end of the book, there's a personal heartfelt note from the author that tells you how the earthquake affected him on that tragic day in which 185 people lost their lives. He was just fifteen years old and was hanging out with friends at a mall car park. The author also acknowledges a number of individuals, Scholastic New Zealand, his family and the city of Christchurch for inspiring him and helping him to fulfil his dream of getting this book developed and published.

Shared Learning and Discussion Points

During the shared sessions, encourage the students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of the ideas and issues featured in the novel. Have them make predictions, inferences and connections to their own personal lives and experiences. Encourage the students to study the characters of Dani and Alfie and how they develop and change as the novel progresses. The students should identify important themes raised in the novel too. The students could also conduct some research on the Christchurch earthquake of 2011 so that they understand the context in which the book is written.

ASK YOUR STUDENTS:

Look at the front cover and read the blurb on the back cover.

- Why do you think the author named the book *Beneath Our Feet*?
- What does the text at the top right-hand side of the front cover tell you about the book's content?
- What might the words 'a borrowed heart' refer to?
- What fate might lie ahead for Dani?
- How might the sealed-off cordon in the red zone give Alfie and Dani time?

COMPREHENSION:

- Alfie sees the headline 'Our worst day' in the newspaper that his mother is reading. Have you ever seen a heading in a newspaper that has affected you and that you have remembered to this day? How and why did it affect you? (p.5)
- Have you experienced a major disaster, such as an earthquake or flooding? Who helped you get to safety? How did you feel in the aftermath? (p.6)
- Do you like to have alone time, or do you prefer to be surrounded by people all of the time? Explain your answer. (p.12)
- What kind of relationship do Alfie and his mum share? (p.15)
- Have you heard of non-Hodgkin lymphoma before? What is it? (p.17)
- Is someone you know seriously ill? What's it like living with illness on a daily basis? How does it make them feel? (p.17)
- Dani's dad disappears into the garage and listens to music when he feels sad. What do you do when you feel sad? How do you cope with stress? (p.18)
- Dani received Beads of Courage when she went for cancer treatment at Starship Hospital. The beads recognise a child's strength, courage and resilience on his or her health journey. What are your thoughts about the Beads of Courage programme? (p.18)



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- How does cancer make Dani seem older than her actual age? (p.20)
- Has something happened in your life that has made it feel like time is moving slowly? How can you distract yourself from the reality? (p.23)
- Have you heard of a bucket list? What is it? What is the first thing you'd put on a bucket list? (p.25)
- Dani doesn't want treatment, but her dad wants her to go through it. How difficult is it when someone you know or love doesn't do something that you want them to? How do you deal with that anguish? (p.27)
- Do you think Dani's dad is being selfish when he pleads to Dani not to give up? Explain your answer. (p.27)
- Why do you think Dani's friends didn't ask if she was okay? What would stop them from doing that? (p.33)
- Why might recovering from a major medical procedure or disease make you feel more fearless? (p.35)
- Why might Dani be more fearless and willing to take more risks than Alfie, who also has health issues? (p.35)
- Why might time stand still in the sealed-off cordon in the red zone? (p.38)
- Would you feel fear or exhilaration if you found yourself in a place where time stopped? Explain your answer. (p.47)
- Would you tell an adult about the time stopping in the cordon, or would you keep it to yourself? Why would you do that? (p.49)
- On page 51, Dani explains the three options she has regarding her cancer. Which option would you choose? Why? Would your family agree with you? (p.51)
- Do you think things can happen that have no logical explanation? Explain your answer. (p.51)
- Do you believe in fate? Why or why not? (p.52)
- Why is Alfie nervous and excited while he waits for Dani? What's happening? (p.59)
- Dani and Alfie hold hands as they enter the cordon. Do you have any superstitious ritual that you carry out, such as crossing your fingers when you board a plane? (p.60)
- Have you had a panic attack? What does it feel like? (p.63)
- Dani says there's 'a nest of bees inside my chest'. How else could you describe her anxiousness? (p.66)
- Do you think the words 'It's going to be okay. You know what to do.' give Dani the courage she needs to make her decision? Why or why not? (p.68)
- Do you think Alfie's own brush with death helps him talk with Dani about her decision to stop treatment? Why or why not? (p.71)
- As Alfie sits on the bathroom floor, what do you think he wants to let Dani know? (p.97) What does Dani mean when she says 'time that's compromised'? (p.100)
- Do you think Dani is mature enough to make the decision to stop treatment? Do you think she is brave or foolish? Explain your answer. (p.100)
- Do you have a friend that you confide in? How does that make you feel? (pp.108–109)
- Would you be an organ donor like Matthew Thornton? Why or why not? (p.114)
- If you found yourself in a place like Evermore, what would you take from a department store? (p.121)
- Do you think Evermore is going to save Dani? Explain your answer. (p.144)
- Do you think Dani's father is in an impossible situation with Dani's decision to stop treatment? Why? (p.146)
- Why is Dani no longer scared when she leaves the hospital? (p.148)
- Do you agree with Alfie that pinching food for a dying girl is slightly different from looting? Why or why not? (p.153)
- Alfie tells Nathan about Dani's cancer. What kind of friend is Nathan to Alfie? (p.155)
- Would you like to meet the person who received a donor heart from one of your deceased loved ones? Explain your answer. (p.158)
- Do you think Alfie and Dani will remain in Evermore and choose to make that moment last forever? Why or why not? What would you do if you were in that situation? (p.166)
- Alfie really doesn't like breaking the glass of the premises in the cordon. Would you feel the same? Why or why not? (p.180)
- Who do you think has it easier – the dying person, or the person left behind? Explain your answer. (p.192)
- Do you appreciate the small moments in life? Why or why not? How could you begin to do that if you don't already? (p.198)
- Would you feel at peace like Dani does when she finishes her mural and ticks off everything on her bucket list? Explain your answer. (p.202)
- The bucket list is complete and the world's no longer still. If Dani had known this would happen, do you think she would have completed her list? Why or why not? (p.205)
- Why is keeping a diary good for Dani? (pp.210–211)
- Can you relate to how Dani feels about her best friend? Why or why not? (p.220)
- Why are Alfie's parents more understanding once they hear the truth about Dani and about Alfie's reason for skipping school? (pp.224–225)
- Why might Dani get Alfie to promise that he will go on a trip and drive through every town, swim at every beach and river? Explain your answer. (p.233)

SEE NEXT PAGE FOR ACTIVITIES



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Activities

ACTIVITY 1: A BUCKET LIST

Dani has cancer and is dying, so she begins to write a bucket list. On page 25, we see her finished list. A bucket list is called that because it's a list of things that someone wants to achieve or experience before he or she 'kicks the bucket', or passes away. Create your own bucket list. It might include things that you want to do soon or things that might take years to achieve, such as buying a house (which was one of the things on Dani's list). Your bucket list could centre around travel, hobbies, scary experiences, nature, adventure, sports, food, family and friends. It's such a personal list of goals and dreams that just about anything can go on it. Dani even wanted to be arrested!

ACTIVITY 2: YOUR EVERMORE

Alfie and Dani explore the sealed-off cordon of Christchurch's red zone and start to dream up a name for this special world where time stops. Deciding that the 'CBD cordon' is not a good name, they brainstorm other possible names, such as Neverland, Never Ever Land, Forever Neverland and Evermore. Finally, they settle on the name Evermore. What would you name this special place. Design a large sign for it. Use an interesting typeface and add border designs and colour to celebrate such a unique place. Display all the finished signs around the classroom.

ACTIVITY 3: TATTOO DESIGN

On page 182, we learn that Dani tattoos the word 'Evermore' on the back of Alfie's bicep, just above his elbow. Then Alfie does the same to Dani. They become a couple with matching tattoos. If you or someone you knew was dying, what matching tattoo would you like to get done and where on your body would you have it inked? On paper, design and draw your tattoo. It could have words or dates only, a picture only or a combination of both. Write why the tattoo is so special to you. Share your work with a friend.

ACTIVITY 4: LEAVING YOUR MARK

The second-to-last thing on Dani's bucket list was 'Leave my mark'. Dani makes her mark when she paints on the large white wall in the red zone with spray paint. She features things that happen to her after she meets Alfie. She paints in Keith Haring's style. Research Keith Haring if you are unfamiliar with his work. Now think of the things that you would paint on the wall if you had to leave your mark. By making her mark, Dani ensures that she will live on forever. Dani dates her work, EST. 2011, which is the year of a catastrophic Christchurch earthquake. Date your work too. You could do a mural on a long sheet of rolled paper. Draw in Keith Haring's style or another style of artwork that you like. Work alone, then share your work with a friend or the rest of the class.

ACTIVITY 5: DEAR LOVED ONE

After Dani dies, her father gives Alfie her journal. Alfie opens it after her funeral and there inside is a letter that she has written for him. It's a letter that says how thankful she is to have met Alfie and how she feels alive being with him, even though she is dying. She goes on to tell him to live, be happy, lead a full life and do everything in this world that he wants to do. Imagine yourself writing a letter expressing your love for someone and how they have affected your life for the better. The letter could be addressed to a family member or a friend.

ACTIVITY 6: WHY DO YOU LOVE ME?

On page 230, when Dani is dying, she asks Alfie why he loves her. He tells her about the first day he met her and all the things that he admires about her. Now pretend you are Dani writing in her journal all the reasons why she loves Alfie. Write what she would put down and then share it with a friend.

Written by Janine Scott

