

When the Kehua Calls

Author: Kingi McKinnon

Synopsis

Rewi loves living in the city but when his father is made redundant money is tight and his family is forced to move back to where his parents grew up – a small country town called Waikiore. Rewi is not happy. And it is not just because the old whare that his family are going to move into is falling down. Rewi has a special ability – he is psychic like his great-grandfather Kaitangata, and he senses a malevolent presence around the whare that scares him.

It is several weeks before Rewi and his family move into the whare and this is when the terrifying nightmares begin. Rewi is a city boy who has never really learned about Maori culture or traditions so he relies on his cousin Pauly for advice on how to deal with his situation. Pauly tells Rewi that a kehua is a spirit that has not moved on from earth to its final resting place. Many kehua take up residence in animals and Pauly believes that the screeching morepork that constantly hangs around Rewi's whare may be a kehua trying to communicate with Rewi.

Rewi suspects that the kehua is Tangatakino, an old man who used to live in the shed outside the whare. Tangatakino wants the family gone and when Rewi ignores the threats that Tangatakino makes during his nightmares his sister Megan suddenly falls ill. No doctor can help her because she has mate moe, the Maori sickness, caused by a makutu that has been placed upon her by Tangatakino. Rewi finally decides to talk to his father about his nightmares when it becomes clear that Megan might not wake up. His father discovers the bones of the Tangatakino by the old shed and calls the local kaumatua in to help him lay the spirit to rest, bless the whare and try and lift the makutu from Megan. But has Rewi waited too long to save his beloved sister?

Text Type

When the Kehua calls is a New Zealand novel that deals with many aspects of Maori culture such as whakapapa; the tramping of the house; wai ora; karakia; makutu and mate moe. The main character in the novel Rewi is based upon the author Kingi McKinnon, who was born in the city and moved to the back blocks as a young boy. Like Rewi, McKinnon did not know much about his culture until he began attending a "Maori" school and visiting the many marae in the area.

When the Kehua calls is a fascinating novel with widespread appeal. It is set in rural New Zealand and is intended to provide non-Maori with an insight into Maori culture. In the novel Rewi's cousin Pauly provides him with information about Maori culture and rituals. Although Rewi has always known that he has a special ability he is initially reluctant to admit that there is anything other-

worldly occurring at his whare. However, as he learns more about ancient customs and rituals he begin to realise that the only way that he can save his sister's life is to tell his father what has been happening and call in the local kaumatua for help. Rewi learns the importance of knowing about and respecting his culture and heritage.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Prologue and Chapter 1 (pp. 7-12), Chapters 2-17 (pp. 13-72) and Chapters 18-29 (pp. 73-114).

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding or words and ideas presented in the novel. Have them analyse the character of Rewi and track how he develops and changes during the course of the story. Wherever possible have students relate Rewi's experiences to their own lives and broader understanding. Students should be able to identify the important ideas and themes presented in the novel – particularly the importance of understanding your culture and heritage.

Introducing the Novel

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

- What is a Kehua?
- Who is the main character in the novel?
- How does the main character know that something is wrong as soon as he pulls up outside the house?
- Why is the paragraph at the top of the blurb written in a different colour to the rest of the blurb? What do you think the shape on the verandah might be?
- What is a morepork? Why are they considered bad luck?
- What do you think the nightmares might be about?
- Do you believe in ghosts? Why/why not? Have you ever had an experience that can't be explained? If so, describe what happened and how it made you feel.

Teacher reads the Prologue and Chapter 1 (pp. 7-12) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension Prologue and Chapter 1 (pp. 7-12)

- Who is telling the story? What is the effect of the first person point of view?
- Why does Rewi consider himself to be "spooky"? What does he notice when he first sees the whare?
- How old is the Rewi? Who else is in his family? Why did the family have to move? Where is his mother's whare? How does Rewi feel about this?

- Describe the whare. What do Rewi's dad and uncle need to fix up before the family can move in? Why does Rewi try hard to hide his distaste from his mother?

Discussion

- Why do you think Rewi gets such a bad feeling when he looks at the house? Do you believe that some people have psychic powers and are able to see into the future? Explain your answer.
- We know that Rewi is Maori. What do you know about Maori culture and customs that might be important in this story?
- Why is Rewi's so against the move to the country? How would you feel if you were in his position? If you had to move what would you miss the most about your old life and why?
- What do you think is going to happen in the story next?

Students read Chapters 2-17 (pp. 13-72) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 2-17 (pp. 13-72)

- Describe the house. How much land surrounds it?
- How old was Rewi's mother when her mother died? Who stayed with her father? Who did Rewi's mother go and live with?
- Who was Tangatakino? Why was Rewi's dad scared of him when he was younger? What does Rewi's mum believe happened to him?
- What does Rewi see from the car as he and his family leave the whare? Why is he so frightened? Why doesn't Rewi tell his parents what he saw?
- What does Pauly believe that Rewi has seen? Why does he believe that Rewi has a gift? Why does Pauly make Rewi feel stupid sometimes?
- Why do Kehua sometimes remain behind when they should be guiding the soul of the dead back to Hawaiiki? What does tramping the house mean?
- Why does Rewi's dad make him get up early in the morning?
- What does Megan call her new grey kitten? What kind of dog does Rewi have and what is its name?
- What kind of work do Rewi and his whanau do to restore the whare?
- Why does Rewi feel so content when he goes to bed on the first night?
- Why is Megan a miracle baby? How does Rewi feel about his sister?
- How long does it take to restore the whare? Why is Rewi upset when the project is completed?
- What makes the piercing screech in the trees outside the whare? Why does Pauly believe that the bird is so significant?
- When Rewi's extended whanau goes back to their own farm what does Rewi feel disappears with them?
- What is Rewi startled when his father tells him that he is returning to the city for a few days?

- Why does Rewi feel like he's gone to "another planet" when he starts at his new school?
- Describe Rewi's first nightmare. How does he feel after he wakes up from the dream? What message does the old man in the dream give Rewi?
- Describe the man in Rewi's dream. Where else has Rewi seen him before?
- What does Pauly believe that Rewi's dream is? Why doesn't Rewi want Pauly to tell his dad about the dream?
- What news does Rewi's mum give him when he arrives home from school? How does Rewi react to this news?
- Why is Rewi so reluctant to clean up around the old shed? Why doesn't he bother arguing with his mother about it? What stopped Rewi from exploring this area before?
- How does Rewi cut his hand? Why doesn't he tell his mother the truth about his injury or about the swarming beetles?
- Why does Pauly believe that old shed might be where the problem is?
- Where does Rewi's dad find work?
- Why does Rewi let Jacko into his room? How is Jacko behaving?
- What does Rewi see pervading Megan's sleeping body?

Discussion

- Why is it so important to know your whakapapa?
- Does Rewi make the right decision when he chooses not to tell his parents about the strange things that he sees and the nightmares that he has been having? Explain your answer.
- What aspects of living in the country does Rewi enjoy? Why do you think he is so sad when the whare is completed? What evidence is there in the story to suggest that Rewi may not miss his old life as much as he thought he was going to?
- Why do you think the author chose to write some of the passages in the novel in italics? What is the effect of this?
- Who do you think the kehua belongs to? Why does he want Rewi and his family gone from the whare?
- Predict what will happen next in the story.

Students read Chapters 18-29 (pp. 73-114) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 18-29 (pp. 72-114)

- What is wrong with Megan?
- Why is Rewi worried that someone has stolen Jacko?
- How does Hoha's behaviour towards Megan change? What does Hoha do when Rewi tries to hand him to Megan? Why do you think Hoha doesn't want to be near Megan? Can you explain why Hoha and Jacko disappear?

- Why does Rewi's mother begin to really worry about Megan? What does Doctor Reihana say when he examines her? Why does he decide to admit her to hospital? What do you think is wrong with Megan?
- How does Rewi feel about his sister's illness? Why does he throw the cricket ball at the morepork?
- Who does Rewi's dad bring over to keep him company while he goes up to the hospital?
- Why does Pauly think that Rewi is brave? Why does Rewi break down in front of his cousin? What does Pauly say to make him feel better?
- Why does Pauly believe that the kehua wants Rewi's whole family gone? Why does he think that he has targeted Megan?
- What is a makutu?
- Why does Rewi believe that the kehua is Tangatakino? Why is it so important to find the old man's body?
- Why is Rewi still reluctant to tell his father about what has been happening when he comes home from the hospital? How does Pauly convince him that the time has come to tell his story?
- Why does Rewi's father apologise to him after Rewi tells him what has been happening?
- What does Pauly tell Rewi about Maori sickness? What is happening to her Rarohenga? What does her survival depend upon?
- Where does Rewi's dad find the body? Who does he call to come and help him lift the tapu? Who is Koro Whati? Why does Rewi find the visitors' presence so soothing?
- Why is it so important that Rewi and Pauly fill the flagons up from the stream instead of the tank?
- Why do the police arrive during the service? Where did Rewi's dad find Tangatakino's body? What does Koro Whati tell the police to do with the body?
- How does Koro Whati get rid of the tapu?
- Describe what happens on the night after they bring Megan home. Why does Rewi feel like he grows up a lot that night?
- Why do the group take Megan down to the river?
- Why doesn't Rewi attend Tangatakino's funeral? Describe what happens when Koro Whati and the others tramp the house.
- How does Rewi know that Megan is going to be alright?

Discussion

- Why do you think animals often have the ability to sense spirits?
- Do you believe in makutu? Why/why not? Have you ever heard stories about people who have been cursed?
- Have you ever seen the haka performed? What is the purpose of this dance? What emotions does it evoke in you?
- What do you think Rewi's experience with the Kehua has taught him? What has he learnt about his culture and heritage by the end of the story?
- Would you like to have Rewi's gift? Why/why not?

- Identify a main idea in the story. How is this theme developed by the author?

Activities

Poetic Language features – Below is a table that contains a number of quotes from the story. You need to identify the language feature used in the quote (simile, metaphor, alliteration or personification) and explain the effect of it (why the author has chosen to use it in the story).

Quote	Language feature	Effect
...“wipe that sour expression off your face”		
Its blank, glassless windows stared right back.		
...its gaping portal yawned like a toothless mouth.		
...before long I was splashing around like an otter.		
Who would want to inherit a dump like this?		
A chill evening mist was rolling in from the creek towards us.		
A pale moon, bloated and silent.		
...the juicy fat stalks popped like firecrackers...		
“Well, I think we’ve just about got it licked...”		
...an ear-splitting screech suddenly shattered the still night air.		
As quiet as the grave		
...then winged away noiselessly into the velvet night.		
When at last dawn’s first grey fingers came creeping through the curtains...		
The dream had shaken me. Really rattled my cage.		

Glossary – Choose 10 Maori words from the text and compile a glossary that explains the meanings of them.

Static Image – Design an alternative book cover for *When the Kehua Calls*. Write a new blurb for your book cover. Write a paragraph explaining why your book cover is effective at encouraging people to read the novel.

Poem – Write a poem about the Kehua. Use figurative language to build atmosphere and create imagery.

Play – Choose an exciting section of the novel and write a script for it. Remember to include a cast of characters and stage directions. Practise your play and then present it to the class.

Research – Choose an aspect of Maori culture that interests you and complete a research assignment about it. Formulate focusing questions to guide your research and try and use written, oral and visual sources of information. Present your information in an essay, on a poster or as an oral presentation.

Short Story – Write a short story about Tangatakino’s life.

Writing – Rewrite the end of the story.

Magazine Article – Write a feature article for a magazine about Rewi’s experience with the Kehua.

Soundtrack – Imagine that *When the Kehua Calls* is being made into a movie. You are in charge of the soundtrack. Select 5 songs and explain when they would be played in the movie and why you chose them.

Notes written by Vicki Williams