



Spearo by Mary-anne Scott

About the author:

Mary-anne Scott is a writer and musician from Havelock North. She is one of nine siblings and growing up, their family had a culture of books and music. The highs and lows of raising four sons has left her with a store of gritty, contemporary issues to write about. Her sons are now adults and she has, so far, three grandsons and two granddaughters.

Her previous novels are: *Sticking with Pigs*, 2018, *Snakes and Ladders*, 2012, and *Coming Home to Roost*, 2016. All these books have been short listed for the NZ Children's Book Awards. Mary-anne also writes as a commentator and as a weekly advice columnist, Dear Mary-anne, for Stuff.co

Mary-anne is an avid reader of fiction and has a particular interest in Young Adult books and short stories. She is also a singer, guitarist and cellist and regularly plays at weddings and in wine bars. She is also a guitar teacher, and a steady stream of young musicians come through her front door after school each day for lessons, providing even more fodder for her writing.

Synopsis of Novel:

'Fourteen-year-old Sean and his mother Anita have only recently emigrated to New Zealand from Zimbabwe after the tragic death of Sean's father as a result of cerebral malaria. As the novel opens Sean is desperately missing both his deceased father and everything about the familiar life and routines he used to know on the family ranch. New Zealand just seems so alien and different from the landlocked nation he is from. To make it harder for Sean he is a small boy and is acutely aware that he has no friends in his new school - that is until a random encounter in the school library links him with the confident and popular Mason Leadbetter from his own class. Mason and his family are very much into spearfishing – in fact everything to do with the sea – and although Sean has no knowledge of the sea at all he seriously values Mason's offer of friendship and determines that he too will become a 'spearo', and so, much to his mother's alarm, he begins a long and difficult process of learning proficiency in his new and dangerous sport. However, Sean has more than just the physical difficulties to adapt to (and they are immense), he also has the relentless enmity of Mason's conservation minded older sister Nicole, who, through an unfortunate misunderstanding, assumes that Sean and his father were into trophy hunting of wild animals in Zimbabwe. Nicole's anger is further fuelled by the recent departure of her mother from the family and she resents the easy way her own father, the likeable Richie, includes Sean into their spearfishing activities.

Things comes to a head when Sean and his mother are invited to join the Leadbetter family in Mahia where the annual spearfishing championships are taking place. As a result of a fishing injury, and much to Nicole's horror, Sean is asked to replace Mason as Nicole's dive buddy on the big tournament day, and so begins a series of dramas where the two foes are placed face to face in the most unforgiving of environments.



Despite spearing numerous fish, including a huge kingfish, they are disqualified by arriving at the weigh-in too late, but that doesn't really matter as the real prize is a grudging respect they now have for each other and the clearing up of the false assumptions that jeopardised their relationship in the first place. The novel ends on a positive note and with the definite hint that these families may become quite a lot closer in the future.

Themes / issues

Even readers with no experience at all, of the sports of diving and spearfishing, will easily relate to the obvious marine conservation themes that are a thread throughout the novel. Like Sean we learn to respect the power and beauty of the sea and to take resources from it sustainably and ethically.

The major themes of the novel, however, are to do with human relationships. Scott easily positions us to see the blinkered understandings of youth and to appreciate how self-pity and anger can blind us to the reality of other people's experiences. The hurt felt by both Sean and Nicole dominates their perceptions of each other, and we learn that it takes courage, and sometimes assistance from others, to peel back the layers of false assumptions.

Many of the students who read this book will be from splintered families and Scott pulls no punches in showing the huge impact this can have on teens. Splintered families are not broken families, however, and readers will also appreciate the strength and hope shown by both Sean's Mother, Anita, and Nicole's father, Richie, both of whom are dealing with their own grief and loss, but both of whom have strong love for their children and a positive vision for the future.

Writing style

The novel is written in the third person but because of our immediate empathy with Sean, in many ways the narration feels very first person. We are quickly immersed in Sean's troubled world and although very few readers will have had the experience of moving to a new and very different country, many will have had the experience of feeling like 'a fish out of water' in a new environment, and struggling to fit in to the group. He is the classic underdog and we want him to succeed.

Activity: Writing in true first person through Nicole's eyes, give her reaction to what she sees on the boys' computer screen when she comes into the classroom to

tell Mason to hurry up. Students who find this difficult could use this beginning. 'I was so cross with Mason – he knew dad was collecting us - and when I finally tracked him down in his period five classroom there he was with some strange kid staring at a computer screen...' This exercise will perhaps allow students to see why Scott didn't write in the first person through Sean's eyes – ie third person allows more misunderstanding to develop.

A major writing strength of the story is how beautifully Scott describes life below the waves. She takes the time to colourfully describe a variety of marine scenes and for newbies to the water it is a lovely introduction to the incredible life to be found close to New Zealand's shores. Another strength is the technical accuracy with which she describes spearfishing. She moves fluidly between the beauty of the sport and the technical dangers and difficulties involved. It is easy to imagine quite a few readers, both boys and girls, being tempted to look deeper into this fascinating activity about which they previously knew next to nothing.

Activity: Select two passages where Scott vividly describes life below the waves – one describing the beauty of the environment and the other describing the power and inherent dangers of the environment. Identify the language features used to convey both of these descriptions, focusing particularly on the selection of adjectives and verbs.

Year level suitability and application

Scott's target reading audience is probably year 10 and 11 boys but due to Nicole's dominance the story will suit girls equally well. Some high school English departments may wish to use it as a year 10 or 11 class set, but it should also find its way into many students' personal reading logs. The novel's strong lead characters, upfront themes and interesting settings will work very well with the NCEA Level One Written Text questions.

Activity: discuss with students how well the novel fits with the 2019 level 1 external exam Written Text questions – it basically works with every question!

Tell students they will be able to attempt writing essays after reading the text.

Learning opportunities

Before reading activities

Reading the cover for visual/verbal clues:

- Discuss with students how publishers 'position/manipulate' readers in a variety of subtle ways before

they read a word of the story. Students work in pairs to study the verbal and visual clues given by front and back cover of the book – colour, images, layout, contrast, font style and placement, title etc. Students make a set of predictions on plot, character and setting based on those clues alone. Younger students will need specific coaching in this skill.

Prior knowledge discussion / activities:

- Students share any personal experience they have of ocean fishing/diving/spearfishing. These discussions often allow students who may not be so good at reading and analysing texts to have their ‘moments in the sun’ and will be an encouragement to them to persevere when the reading becomes challenging. The teacher or a student may also be able to bring in some spearfishing equipment to show the students – due care and caution required of course. And of course there may well be students who find the entire concept of killing any sea life abhorrent – empathy and tact required.
- Get students to share any knowledge they have of Zimbabwe - some will never have heard of the country. Students given ten minutes to google interesting facts about the country – everyone in the class has to give one fact that no-one else gives. Discuss life under Robert Mugabe’s rule, but avoid becoming too ‘preachy’.
- Class discussion on the pros and cons of trophy hunting in certain African countries. Hold a structured class debate on the topic ‘That trophy hunting has a valid place in the social and economic life of African nations’.
- Class discussion on animal poaching in Zimbabwe and other African nations. Be careful with this activity (and the previous one) as students may well be traumatised by some of the images to be found online of poaching.
- There is likely to be one or more students (or teachers) in every school who have experience of adapting to life in a new country. If one of these students or teachers is willing, students could interview them on their experiences. Schools with a history of hosting international students will have an advantage here.

During reading:

Understanding the content – answers may be written or oral

Chapter one:

1. What does Sean’s computer activities in the library tell us about his state of mind?
2. What does Sean admire about Mason’s way with classmates?
3. How did Sean acquire good editing skills?
4. What is similar about the boys’ home circumstances?
5. What is Sean’s main reason for expressing great interest in Mason’s chosen sport?

Chapter two:

1. What distinction does Sean make between trophy hunters and poachers?
2. Why is Nicole so annoyed by the images on Sean’s computer?
3. Why does she niggle him so much when he is learning to dive in their pool?

Chapter three:

1. How does Richie put Sean at ease?
2. What is Anita’s initial reaction to Sean’s desire to learn spearfishing?
3. Give two things Sean misses about home and two things he doesn’t like about his new land.

Chapter four:

1. What does Mason do early in this chapter that really pleases Sean?
2. In what ways is Kura welcoming to Sean?
3. Why do people who are able to leave Zimbabwe find life financially difficult in their new countries?

Chapter five:

1. What causes Sean to panic when he first dives deep with Mason?
2. What success does he have during this first dive?

Chapter six:

1. What upsets Anita about the things Sean wants to sell to finance his wetsuit?
2. What is your impression of Anita by this stage of the story?
3. Why does Sean hesitate when he has a fish in his sights?

Chapter seven:

1. What does Sean do that annoys Blubs?
2. In what ways are child and parent roles reversed in this chapter?
3. What distinction does Kura make between minorities and misfits?

Chapter eight:

1. What does Sean mean by 'Pink's an attitude not a colour'?

Chapter nine:

1. Describe the sea conditions on this dive?
2. What is the main reason for Sean getting into trouble?
3. What potentially fatal mistake does he make when kicking for the surface?

Chapter ten:

1. What hopes does Sean have for his mother and Richie?
2. Explain how Nicole unravels all his plans?

Chapter eleven:

1. What is your response to his mother's ban on all sea activities?
2. Describe Alphonso's personality.
3. What 'trick' does Anita play on Sean when she backs down on her sea ban?

Chapter twelve:

1. Describe the car trip to Mahia?
2. Explain the pun in the name of Richie's boat.
3. Describe the crayfishing process.
4. What causes Sean's sudden yearning for his father?

Chapter thirteen:

1. Describe Sean's relationship with Kura.
2. How did Sean's father die?

Chapter fourteen:

1. What are the possible origins of the 'no bananas on boats' superstition.
2. What is happening during a 'boil up'?

Chapter fifteen:

1. How do the dolphins feeding methods differ from that of kahawai?
2. What brings on Nicole's tears?

Chapter sixteen:

1. List the fish species needed for the tournament?
2. How is Mason injured?

Chapter seventeen:

1. What goes through Sean's mind when considering whether or not to dive in Mason's place?
2. What is Sean most worried about on the morning of the dive?

Chapter eighteen:

1. What do Sean and Nicole squabble about during their first dives of the tournament?
2. What wrong assumption has Nicole made about Sean's father?

Chapter nineteen:

1. What is the purpose of the glass balls?
2. Justify your view on who should be able to claim the kingfish.

Chapter twenty:

1. Describe the process of getting the fish onboard the boat.

Chapter twenty-one:

1. How does Anita explain Nicole's anger?
2. Why does Anita say that Sean should not accept a prize.

Chapter twenty-two:

1. In what way might Sean be underestimating Daryl?
2. What new understanding does Sean display about Nicole?

Chapter twenty-three

1. Why does Sean feel better after his apology, even though Nicole did not apologise back?
2. Where are the Auckland Islands? (clue – they are not near Auckland)
3. In what way does the ending of the story tie up all the false assumptions?

Post reading: Taking it further

Explain Scott's choice of title for the novel and suggest other possible titles with explanations for each.

Students write a letter to Mary-Anne Scott giving their reaction to her novel and asking her to clarify or elaborate on any areas of concern or issues they may have. They could also ask her about her title choice and hopefully find out how close to the mark they were.

Activity one: Group work activity

Select two of the themes / issues listed earlier in these notes and get students to elaborate more on what the author may be commenting on and how she may be positioning them think about these issues. When considering the 'how' aspect students will need to closely consider character presentation. A group spokesperson reports findings to the class.

Activity two: Individual work – longer paragraph answers.

- Describe at least one challenge faced by a character in the written text. Explain how this challenge helped you understand the character.
- Describe at least one idea that changed your perspective or point of view in the written text. Explain how this idea changed your perspective.
- Describe a moment in the written text that surprised or shocked you. Explain how this moment was important to the text as a whole.
- Describe a character that you disliked or admired in the written text. Explain how your feeling towards this character helped you understand the text as a whole.
- Look at the 2019 Level 1 Written Text external exam questions. Write brief notes on how applicable each one is to the novel, then select one and write a structured essay. Give students ample time for planning and writing – two periods will be sufficient.

Role play activities: (all role plays need to be handled with sensitivity and closely monitored by the teacher)

- Monologue – adopt the role of either Sean, Nicole, Anita or Richie and speaking in character explain your relationship with another character. Discuss how the relationship evolves.
- Monologue - Speaking as Sean one year in the future reflect on the events of a year ago and comment on how they have helped make you the person you are now.
- Group role play – in groups of two to four students select, rehearse and present a conflict situation in the novel.

Beyond the text activities:

- Write a speech on an aspect of ocean conservation, focusing on practical solutions for the challenges facing conservationists.
- Design a poster highlighting the cruelty and injustice of animal poaching in Africa.
- Design a short 'handbook' that allows new international students in your school to more easily adapt to their new surroundings.
- Interview one or more international students in your school focusing on what life was like in their home-lands.

by Denis Wright