



Neands

by Dan Salmon

About the author

Dan Salmon is a screen director, writer and producer of award-winning documentaries and television. He was a contributor to 'Volume One of The Journal of Urgent Writing', and co-writer of 'Helen Clark: Inside Stories'.

Synopsis of novel

This dark and engaging teen thriller hits the market as a very opportune time, because the pandemic sweeping the world of the novel has a number of chilling similarities to the global Covid 19 pandemic that we are dealing with at the moment. In the world of the novel our ongoing abuse of our fragile ecosystem appears to have somehow activated and mutated the Neanderthal genes that most of us carry. How it started no one is exactly sure, but it is extremely contagious and as the novel opens humans are very much an oppressed minority fighting for their very survival against the brutal and bullying Neands.

We experience the story through the eyes of fourteen-year-old New Zealander Charlie and after the death of his father and disappearance of his mother, both proactive scientists, we are plunged into a very well described survive against overwhelming odds story. What makes the story more engaging and more real, is that it is also about friendships and emerging love relationships. When the tensions of the novel ramp to straining point the reader is reassured that even in the bleakest of times our humanity and need to love and nurture others shines through.

After his mother's disappearance Charlie is taken in by Ngairie and Bill who, like his parents, are scientists determined to fight back against the wave of anti-science and anti-intellectualism sweeping the globe. There he meets two more orphaned teens, Pru and Lily, both smart and feisty young women, who along with Charlie refuse to accept that changing to a Neand and adopting their intellectually stunted worldview is inevitable. With Charlie as a reliable first person narrator we are taken on a series of increasingly frightening survival struggles. The novel ends on a note of optimism as the three teens find succour with a group of fellow human escapees on an offshore island and with their immediate safety ensured we know that the teens will be able to continue their fight against the Neands.

Themes / issues

Like many teen-targeted dystopian novels the main theme here is the resilience of the teenage human spirit when faced with daunting and life-threatening obstacles. Most students should be able to make thematic connections to teen novels such as 'The Hunger Games' and the Tomorrow series and these connections will be a rich source of extension work for the more motivated students.

Another major theme is to do with healthy relationships between the sexes and the target audience will very keenly follow the emerging emotional and physical love between Charlie and Pru. The writer is very honest in his portrayal of the joys and the pitfalls the young experience when first engaging in these types of relationships and is careful in his handling of the whole 'consent' issue. Parallel with the Charlie and Pru relationship is the equally strong friendship between Pru and Ivy and the loyalty these two display is a strong sub-theme.

And, of course, there are the more obvious themes to do with caring for our fragile environment and for empowering the world's scientists and academics to protect us from the horrors that neglect can lead to. More astute students will be looking with fresh eyes at the anti-science propaganda and dangerous popularism being exhibited by certain irresponsible world leaders in response to our current global crisis, although the writer is careful not to step too far into this moral minefield. Perhaps teachers using the novel should do the same. If taught well the novel will lead students to those conclusions anyway.

Setting

We presume the novel is set physically in Auckland, although this is never stated. The writer prefers a generic New Zealand urban setting to reinforce the idea that the pandemic is not limited to a specific setting, but is nationwide, and we have to assume, internationally wide.

Like the physical setting the timing of the story is also intentionally vague. Because of the reference to Covid 19 we must assume that the novel is set in the present time.

Writing style

The novel is written in first person past tense and this works well for a story of this nature. The intense emotions and trauma the three main characters experience are very well portrayed and most readers will be easily transported into their nightmarish world.

Teachers using this novel as a class set (and it is well suited for this purpose) will be pleased at the amount of figurative language used, particularly thoughtful use of metaphor and simile, to more easily allow the reader to engage with the three leads.

The writer has handled the amount of scientific and technical information a dystopian work of this nature requires very thoughtfully, and cleverly avoids 'dumping' too much difficult information into the story. He puts this information outside the main plot line, often in the form of handwritten notes by Charlie or newspaper cuttings.

Year level suitability and application

Although the novel is best suited for teens of roughly the same age as the protagonists, it works well for a wide age range. Senior students will be more able to engage with the complex nature of the pandemic sweeping the world of the novel and English teachers using it are advised to liaise with their schools' science departments as the novel presents great opportunities for cross-curricular learning.

Characters

Charlie, Pru and Ivy are very engaging characters although we couldn't really call them 'typical' NZ teens, in that their parents were all academics and they have been brought up to analyse and to question. We are positioned, via first person narration, to identify most closely with Charlie, and he proves to be a very good vehicle for us to explore this horrific new world. Both Pru and Ivy are interesting characters and are different enough for readers to side with one or both. Teenage readers will be able to identify with, and many will have experience of, how difficult it can be for a group of friends to remain as such when two of the group pair off as a couple. This sensitive issue is handled well in the story. The Neand teens the trio interact with are typecast as big, brutal and boorish. This is true for the adult Neands as well, the best example being the school principal, who is so far removed from what we expect a principal to be like it is almost amusing. The adult human characters are there as foils to the three teens although Ngaire is an engaging person and we keenly empathise with the traumatic change she is subjected to.

Learning opportunities

Before reading: Setting the scene

Reading the cover for visual/verbal clues:

- Students work in pairs to study the verbal and visual clues given by front and back cover of the book. They make a set of predictions on plot, character and setting based on those clues alone. Younger students will need specific coaching in this skill.
- While doing this, students can also make a list of statement that identify how they are being 'positioned' by use of colour, contrast, images, layout, font style.

Prior knowledge discussion / activities:

- Students share their awareness of global pandemics, eg the Great Plague of 14th century, or the more recent avian and swine spread pandemics. And of course this is a good time for discussion on how New Zealand has coped with Covid 19 compared to the world experience.
- Discussion on human evolution theories. Do a little research on the Neanderthal branch of the human tree. Good opportunity to link with your school's biology teachers for more information on this.

During reading:

Understanding the content (Optional activity) Oral or written answers.

Chapter one:

1. How does Charlie try to explain to Sally what a Neand is?
2. Why is he so annoyed by his answer?

Chapter two:

3. Why do Charlie and his mum avoid the real issues dogging them?
4. List the main differences between Neands and humans?

Chapter three:

5. Do you think Charlie is the only person worried about the Neands?
6. Give evidence for your answer.
7. Apart from people, what else is disappearing?

Chapter four:

8. Explain Ngairé's connection to Charlie's parents
9. Explain Ngairé's comment 'we were young and stupid — no, we were young and normal.'

Chapter five:

10. Quote two examples of a water-based metaphor used to establish setting.
11. What simple statement does Pru make that reassures Charlie?
12. Describe the teens' relationship by the end of the chapter.

Chapter six:

13. What is symbolic about the fishing rod being jerked out of his dad's hands?

Chapter seven:

14. How is a simile used early in this chapter to establish both setting and theme?
15. Describe Charlie's introduction to how his new school operates.
16. Explain the link between Ms Moody's threat to ban books and the German Nazi party.
17. What is the humans only weapon against the Neands?

Chapter eight:

18. What happened to Ivy's father?
19. What ideas are being debated in the online science chatroom?

Chapter nine:

20. Why was Alan a bit rude to Charlie when they first met?
21. What are plastic genes?
22. What conflicting emotions does Charlie have about the two girls?

Chapter ten:

23. What is it that sets off the chimps in the zoo?
24. Did the right 'animal' die?
25. In what way are most humans hybrids?

Chapter eleven:

26. What escape do the three teens indulge in?
27. How might memory loss or retrograde amnesia partly explain what is going on in society?

Chapter twelve:

28. What outdated practice has been reintroduced to the school system?
29. What idea of Charlie's gives them some hope?
30. What flaws can you see in this plan?

Chapter thirteen:

31. What is Ngairé's reaction to the plan?
32. What is Bill's work and why should this give hope to the teens?

Chapter fourteen:

33. In what ways can a library card be a very dangerous weapon?
34. How does Nicky misuse the history teacher's quote?
35. What very ominous thing takes place in the fight?

Chapter fifteen:

36. What do you think of the principal's punishments?
37. What do the Prime-Minister's cutbacks say about what sort of society is emerging?

Chapter sixteen:

38. Why does the principal fire Ms Mackenzie?
39. What does Charlie decide is the real measure of humanity?
40. How is bacteria both essential and a danger?

Chapter seventeen:

41. What gifts do Pru and Charlie exchange?

Chapter eighteen:

42. Why do Ngairé and Alan want the three teens to continue going to school?
43. What idea of Charlie's gets a second chance?

Chapter nineteen:

44. In what way is Charlie 'busted'?
45. Describe the odd events at the religious meeting?
46. How does Charlie 'stuff up' at the end of the chapter?

Chapter twenty:

47. What message did Pru get from the movie?

Chapter twenty-one:

48. How can walking away endorse prejudice?
49. What evidence is there that Pru knows a lot about sailing?

Chapter twenty-two:

50. What are you thinking about Nгаire's chances?
51. Summarise the bad effects of climate change?

Chapter twenty-three:

52. In what ways was Charlie being sexist?

Chapter twenty-four:

53. Do you think Nгаire is making the right decision?

Chapter twenty-five:

54. What lightens the mood at the 'last supper'?
55. What are zoonotic diseases?

Chapter twenty-six:

56. What evidence is there that Nгаire is changing?
57. What does Alan ask Charlie to do?

Chapter twenty-seven:

58. Why do the rugby players turn on Charlie?
59. In what way is the principal responsible for Frank's death?
60. Why are Ivy's swear words to the principal so surprising?

Chapter twenty-eight:

61. How does the principal turn Frank's death into Charlie's fault?
62. Why does Charlie delete their names from the school's computer records?

Chapter twenty-nine:

63. What has happened to Alan?

Chapter thirty:

64. Explain the 'Wizard of Oz' references.

Chapter thirty-one:

65. In what ways is the small church more real than the huge ones the Neands go to?
66. Why is Charlie a bit suspicious of the minister?

Chapter thirty-two:

67. In what ways do the three boys behave like regular teen males?

Chapter thirty-three:

68. How does the minister say he gets food for the people he shelters?
69. What is unusual about the minister and his wife?
70. Give two reasons Charlie is angry about the food stealing expedition?

Chapter thirty-four:

71. What does Charlie dislike about Paul?
72. In what ways is Ivy's behaviour changing a bit around Paul and Sam?

Chapter thirty-five:

73. What is both impressive and scary about Rick?

Chapter thirty-six:

74. Quote a sentence that sums up the brutality of the fight?
75. What family secret do both girls reveal?

Chapter thirty-seven:

76. Why do the teens want to fond Bill?
77. What horrors do they find instead?

Chapter thirty-eight:

78. Describe their escape from the security guard.
79. What is the teens longer term plan?

Chapter thirty-nine:

80. What are your fears for Ivy?

Chapter forty:

81. How do the teens 'go shopping'?

Chapter forty-one:

82. Describe the process of getting the engine started?
83. What is dangerous about Charlie saying he loves Pru?
84. What do the teens find in Paparenga Bay?
85. What are Charlie's final thoughts?

Post-reading: Taking it further

Theme analysis:

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 he may be positioning them to think about these issues. When considering the 'how' aspect students will need to closely consider character interaction.

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 and explain how this challenge helped you understand the character.
- Describe at least one idea that changed or helped develop your

perspective or point of view in the written text. Explain how this idea changed or helped develop your perspective.

- Describe a key 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.

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

- Monologue — adopt the role of Charlie, Pru or Ivy and speaking in character explain your relationship with another character. Discuss how the relationship evolves.
- Monologue - Speaking as the same character 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 — adopt the roles of Charlie, Pru and Ivy and role play an alternative ending to the novel — one that is still feasible.

Beyond the text activities:

- Get students to research human evolution theories, focusing particularly on Neanderthal theories. Students write a list of facts we know and another list of commonly held but unproven ‘facts’.
- Do in-depth research on a specific pandemic, focusing on origins of the pandemic, attempts to contain it and the social and economic impacts of the pandemic.
- Organise a class debate on the following moot:

‘That the New Zealand approach to containing and eliminating Covid 19 is the only approach a responsible nation could follow’