

Letters from the coffin-trenches

by Ken Catran

A teacher's resource
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This resource is designed to be used with Year 9 -11 English classes. The novel can be studied as part of a junior English programme or a social studies unit of World War One or, in Year 11, as a text for Achievement Standard 1.3 (Read, study and show understanding of extended written text(s)). It links with the following English Curriculum Strands and Achievement Objectives at levels five and six:

- **Written Language: Reading:**
 - Personal Reading
 - Close Reading
- **Written Language: Writing:**
 - Creative Writing
 - Expressive/Personal Writing
 - Formal Writing
- **Oral Language: speaking and listening**
 - Interpersonal speaking
 - Interpersonal listening
- **Visual Language: presenting and viewing**
- **Language Process:**
 - exploring language
 - thinking critically
 - processing information

Reading Comprehension:

After you have read the novel, work through these questions which will check that you have understood the key events and ideas of the story. The questions are organised chronologically.

1. How long do Harry's parents believe the war will last?
2. Describe what the enlistment poster looks like.
3. Why are Jessica's and Harry's communications a secret?
4. Why does Harry share his lunch with Hooter?
5. What is Hooter's real name?
6. Where is Jessica's brother Benjamin and what is he doing there?
7. In which city does Harry enlist?
8. What does Rupert Creel's father do for a job?
9. Describe Jessica's encounter with the returned soldier at the railway station.
10. What things do the men do to Hooter at the barracks?
11. Why does Creel get a telling off from Captain Feilds?
12. Why does Miss Bulstrode put Harry's photograph in the cupboard?
13. Why were the barracks quiet the night before the soldiers leave for battle?
14. In which city do the soldiers spend their first leave?
15. What does 'Pats' do and what is his punishment?
16. Why is Harry impressed with the Pyramids?
17. What information about the Turks does a staff officer pass onto the soldiers?
18. Why are the men issued rum?
19. Where do they land?
20. Who was the first of Harry's company to get hurt?

21. What does Jessica do at Harkaway Beach?
22. What 'news' does she receive?
23. Why does Harry often mention the 'censor's black scoring pen'?
24. Briefly describe their first go at taking the Turkish trenches.
25. What promotion does Harry receive?
26. Why was their 'excursion' fruitless?
27. What does Staff Major Wickham recommend to Sir Ian Godley?
28. Describe Jessica's first day as a nursing aide.
29. Why are the trenches nicknamed 'coffin-trenches'?
30. Describe what happens during the 'half-day truce'.
31. How do the Turks 'use' Rennie?
32. What comparison does Harry use to explain the distance between the trenches?
33. What has happened to Benjamin?
34. What happens when Jessica gives her speech at the 'Patriotic Convention'?
35. Give an account, using the information from Hooter's journal, of the attack on Chunuk Bair.
36. Where is Jessica being transferred to?
37. What does Harry do in Lemnos?
38. How does Harry die?
39. Why does Moran send Hooter's journal to Jessica?
40. How does Jessica die?
41. What happened to Moran after the war?
42. Explain the connection between the last letter of the book and the first email of the book.
43. What is the significance of the last two sentences of the book and the date that follows and why would this be considered ironic?

Characterisation

Using examples from the novel and with explanations, do the following:

1. Describe the character of **Harry** at:

the start of his story
the end of his story
2. Describe the changes which have occurred and list the events which caused these changes?
3. Explain why these changes are significant.
4. Describe the character of **Jessica** at:

the start of her story
the end of her story
5. Describe the changes which have occurred and list the events which caused these changes?
6. Explain why these changes are significant.
7. Describe the relationship between **Jessica and Harry** at:

the start of the book
the end of the book
8. Explain why their relationship is an important one.
9. For each of the following:

Hooter	Creel	Moran
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 - Write a short description of the person.
 - Explain the significance of the person to our understanding of what is happening around Harry.
 - Describe the relationship between the character and Harry. Include whether there are changes in the relationship and/or whether Harry learns important information from his relationship with the character.
 - Either draw or cut out a picture from a magazine which you believe best represents the character.
 - Explain what happens to the character after the battle at Gallipoli.

For each of the following:

Staff Atkinson Aunt Kate Jessica's mother

- Write a short description of the person.
- Explain the significance of the person to our understanding of what is happening around Jessica.
- Describe the relationship between the character and Jessica. Include whether there are changes in the relationship and/or whether Jessica learns important information from her relationship with the character.
- Either draw or cut out a picture from a magazine which you believe best represents the character.
- Explain what happens to the character after the battle at Gallipoli.

10. The back cover of the blurb says "But bloodshed and brutal reality lie waiting in the coffin-trenches of Gallipoli. Honour...heroism...and hell." To what extent is this true for the characters in the novel?

Style

1. *Letters from the coffin-trenches* is written in an interesting way because:

- the story is told only in letter form;
- it makes us think;
- there are at least two people telling the story;
- a lot of what the two main characters write is considered *ironic*.
- it has some very descriptive passages;
- it is set during a true event:
- a lot is not said and the reader must work out the in between parts;
- it is very realistic.

Choose **two** of the above and in about one paragraph for each statement, explain, giving details and examples from the story, how it is true for the novel.

2. Look closely at pages 105 - 113 and answer the following:

- Explain, providing detailed examples, how the author uses **sentence variation and punctuation** to make this passage realistic.
- Identify **two sound techniques** used in this passage and explain the effects of them.
- Identify **two examples of figurative language** used in the passage and discuss their effectiveness.

3. Word Bank:

Use a dictionary to find the definitions of the words listed below:

absolve	arrayed	atrocious	attested	barrage	cavalier
chaperone	concerto	contretemps	crusade	decorum	dire
dulcet	embarkation	enlistment	epistle	essayed	flensed
garnish	gauntlet	illiterate	imperious	impudent	infallible
insipid	knave	lodgings	quest	militia	minion
modicum	obstinate	paynim horde	perilous	rebuke	repose
reposte	sabotage	salient	sparring	subdue	tarry
vigil					

4. For **ten** of the above, write a sentence of your own using the new word.

Setting

1. Trace an outline of a map of Europe and Northern Africa. Mark on it the territories as they were during the World War One. Mark, also, the places where Harry and Jessica went. Include a key and label clearly.
2. List the equipment, food, tools, weapons, and other supplies the men had in the trenches.
3. Using the information in the book and your own research, draw what the trenches might have looked like from a bird's eye view. Draw to scale and include the Turkish trenches and no-man's-land.

Themes

1. Write your own definition for the following words:

Honour	Heroism	Glory	Victory	Defeat
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 2. Then, write down the dictionary definition for each word.
 3. Either on your own, in pairs or in a small group, display your definitions. You can use magazine pictures, words, symbols, illustrations, collage.
 4. Explain which word is the most important quality to achieve and why.
 5. Using examples from the novel, describe the lesson or lessons we learn from reading this story and explain why the might be considered important.
 6. Below are a list of **key quotations** from the novel. For each of the following quotations explain:
 - what is happening at that moment in the story;
 - the importance/significance of the statement;
 - your personal response to the statement.
- *But the Empire needs her young men against this terrible menace. pg 11*
 - *What you are doing is so right and brave. pg 13*
 - *He said no war was worth such a cost in human life., pg 23*
 - *Such a sacrifice is so much more than words and knitting socks. pg 25*
 - *He'd joined by free choice and because he owed something to the country that had protected his mother and father. pg 34*
 - *we poor females must always be second billing to the lion male. pg 38*
 - *We must sacrifice to the Empires' needs. pg 39*
 - *But real memory is in the heart, Harry, and that is where I will always hold you. pg 43*
 - *The British Government would never endanger their citizens like that. pg 54*
 - *The knights would not have understood a war like this - or do ideals never change? pg 55*
 - *I think I am more scared of letting the others down. pg 56*
 - *Only a fool underestimated the enemy. pg 57*
 - *Ideals don't stop bullets. pg 58*
 - *The Turks are active, stubborn and ready to sell their lives dearly. pg 59*
 - *We are stick like a bone in his throat and may he choke. pg 60*
 - *Surely it must end soon. pg 61*
 - *Memory can be as painful as toothache and bright as the sun. pg 63*
 - *I craved glory and have it by the bucketload. pg 68*
 - *They were the enemy and it was kill or be killed. pg 74*
 - *There is nothing heroic about wounds or death. pg 75*
 - *Hooter said we should all go home and Firuz just looked at him and said, "i am home; you go home." pg 79*
 - *It was right for every man to fight for his country against invaders. ' pg 79*
 - *It sounds so stupid not to think of modern warfare being in any way glorious. pg 87*
 - *I'm a soldier who kills when he has to and does what he's ordered to. pg 87*
 - *I have few illusions left now and only hope I can learn from it all. pg 95*

- *How much of what we are told is lies. pg 103*
- *I think this war will teach us that we will have to stand up and brave the tempest and see where it takes us. pg 114*

Written Language: Writing

1. Creative Writing:

- Re-write the first meeting between Harry and Hooter and the next few days from Hooter's point of view. How does this change your perception of him and what is happening for the new soldiers?
- Write a different ending for *Letters from the coffin-trenches* where Jessica and Harry meet again. Explain why this would or would not be a better ending.
- Write a short story about a character who fought during the Gallipoli campaign.
- Write Jessica and Harry's meeting at the train station as a short story. Think carefully about which narrative point of view you will choose and what information you include.

2. Expressive/Personal Writing:

- Imagine you are Staff Atkinson. You have been asked to speak at Jessica's funeral. Write the eulogy you would deliver.
- Imagine you are a teenager in a country which is being invaded. Write a diary account of how you feel and what happens.
- Write a letter to the author Ken Catran saying what you think of the novel. He can be contacted at c/- Random House, 18 Poland Road, Glenfield, Auckland, New Zealand

3. Formal Writing:

- Write a formal book review for the novel. Include comments on the language used, the treatment of the topics and the appropriateness of the novel for teenagers.
- Write an article on one of the many things people did for the war effort.
- Write a formal essay on one of the ideas presented in the statements in the theme section.

Visual Language: Static Images

A static image is an image that does not move. When you create a static image you need to consider these questions:

- why do you want to make this static image? (the purpose);
- what do you want to say? (the message);
- who do you want to say it to? (the audience);
- and, how will you get it across? (techniques).

The last question is divided into two sections:

The visual techniques, for example:

colour dominant image layout symbol contrast
lettering

And language techniques, for example:

alliteration rhyme pun cliché hyperbole simile
listing imperatives jargon rhetorical question metaphor

A static image is successful if it achieves its purpose.

TASK ONE:

Look at the cover (back and front) of *Letters from the coffin-trenches*.

- 1) What is its **purpose**?
- 2) What is the **message**?
- 3) Who is the image aimed at? (the **audience**)

- 4) What visual techniques are used to get the reader's attention?
 5) How effective is the cover? Give reasons for your answer.

TASK TWO:

Design your own front cover for the book.

or

Design a poster encouraging men to enlist for the war effort.

or

Design a poster against the war effort.

and

explain your answers to 1 to 4 above. Ensure you give detailed reasons for your choice of visual and verbal techniques.

TASK THREE

Re-create, in three-dimensional/model form, the coffin-trenches. This would be an excellent task to do in a group.

Extra Activities

Research:

The following ideas are mentioned in the novel:

Morte d'Arthur	The Round Table
Kaiser	Hun
The Holy Grail	Crusade
Gallipoli	The Ottoman Empire
The Influenza Epidemic	Anzac

Using an encyclopaedia, find out what each of these mean and, in a 100 word paragraph, explain their significance to the ideas presented in *Letters from the coffin-trenches*.

or

Find out how about the origins of World War One, what New Zealand did in response to it and what happened afterwards.

Essay Topics

1. Describe the setting of the novel and explain, using detailed examples and explanations, why this setting is important to the story.
2. Describe an important moment in the novel and explain the significance of that moment to those characters involved and to the rest of the story.
3. Explain how and why the beginning or end of the novel is effective.
4. Describe a problem a character has and how he or she tried to overcome the problem.
5. Explain, giving detailed reasons and explanations, why the title of the novel is appropriate for the story.
6. Describe a relationship one important character has with another. Why is this relationship important?
7. Explain, using detailed examples and explanations why other teenagers should read this novel.