

# Teacher Notes

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# COAST WATCHER

DAVID HILL

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(comprehension/themes/  
characters/language)
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(research and activities)

## Specifications:

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## About the book

**A tense, exciting war adventure inspired by the coastwatchers of Operation Pacific, from award-winning author David Hill.**

It's 1943, and 19-year-old radio operator Frank Benson is shipped out to an enemy-occupied island in the Solomons with two other soldiers. Their mission is to spy on the Japanese.

In dense jungle they meet a Solomon Islander who says he has information that will shatter Japanese defences. But he could be working for the enemy. What if it's a trap to get them killed?

No training could have prepared Frank for this decision. Their lives - and Operation Pacific - depend on his next move.

## About the author

David Hill is a prolific and highly regarded New Zealand writer, playwright, poet, columnist and critic. Best known for his highly popular and award-winning body of work for young people, ranging from picture books to teenage fiction, his novels have been published all around the world and translated into several



In 1982 he became a full-time writer and his first novel for teenagers, *See Ya, Simon* (1992), about a boy with muscular dystrophy, was shortlisted for major awards in New Zealand and the UK. In 2002 it was awarded the Storylines Gaelyn Gordon Award for a Much-loved Book.

In 2004 David was made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit and in 2005 he was awarded the Storylines Margaret Mahy Medal, acknowledging his significant contribution to children's literature in New Zealand.

## Before reading

- 1) Cover art and design can give us clues about the book inside. What do you think the moon inside the silhouetted head represents? What do you think about the choice to use the colours purple, blue and green? Why do you think these choices were made? Name two other visual or verbal features that you think give us clues about the story, and have a guess at what they might mean.
- 2) The title of a book gives us information, too. From just looking at the cover, who or what do you think a 'coast watcher' is?
- 3) David Hill is a very experienced New Zealand writer. Open the book to the first page and look at the author's biography. Make a list of the books he has written. Have you read any of them?
- 4) Turn over to the second page. This book is dedicated to 'my dad, Bob Hill, who served'. What does this mean? What clue does this give you about the book?
- 5) The next page provides a map for readers. Why? What is different about this map to a usual map of the Pacific?



## During reading

### Close Reading Questions

- 1) Who or what are the Zeroes?
- 2) In chapter two, the Sanatorium is mentioned. What do we learn?
- 3) What is the password between NZ soldiers?
- 4) What nickname does Wally give the wireless set?
- 5) What derogatory description does Frank give 'coastwatcher' after finding out he is to become one?
- 6) What does 'BOOMERANG' mean in code?
- 7) What does 'BLOWFLIES SWATTED' mean in code?
- 8) Who is the fellow coastwatcher that Frank and Wally meet in this chapter?
- 9) Who is Tyrone?
- 10) What is the password suggested by Les?
- 11) Name one reason Frank was relieved at the end of their climb.
- 12) What is the scar on Les' back from?
- 13) What part of Australia was bombed by the Japanese in WW2?
- 14) Who do the men meet in this chapter?
- 15) What happens to the canoe when the Japanese plane flies over?
- 16) What happened to Les' brother Tim?
- 17) What does A'ata call their camp?
- 18) Where did the men go? With whom?
- 19) Where did A'ata dream of visiting? Why couldn't he?
- 20) What language does Les speak?
- 21) What is 'the thing that falls'?
- 22) According to the villagers, what does crocodile taste like?
- 23) What is the plan with the Japanese code book?
- 24) When do the Japanese sometimes send patrols out?
- 25) What do the squawking birds indicate in this chapter?
- 26) Why did the villagers light a fire?
- 27) Who is drinking from the stream?
- 28) What extraordinary thing does Frank do in this chapter?
- 29) Why does Frank question what happened at the stream?
- 30) What awful thing does A'ata demand Frank do?
- 31) Does he do it?
- 32) Are you satisfied with the book's ending? Why/not?

# Characters

## FRANK

**Frank Benson** is the main character in this book.

'There are so many things I don't know,' Frank thinks in Chapter three.

What do you think he means? What does this represent about his character?

Before serving in the war:

- a. What illness did Frank have?
- b. Where was Frank because of this?
- c. What clues do we see early on in the book that suggest Frank doesn't have a great relationship with his father?

1) How does Frank change throughout the novel? Divide a page into three columns titled 'Beginning', 'Middle' and 'End' (see below). Fill in the columns with your understanding of Frank throughout the text.

BEGINNING	MIDDLE	END

Find quotes from the book to support your opinion. Add the quotes to this character development page.



## FRANK'S FRIENDSHIPS

Frank's friendships with other people are really important throughout the text. In fact, it's one of the main themes in the book.

Wally Ropata is introduced to us in the first chapter. We meet Les Murray in chapter 8. Then, importantly, Frank meets A'ata.

Of Wally, Frank says: *'Look at Wally - a real soldier, a guy who carried his weapon like he'd been born with it.'* (21) and *'The war — the world — depended on blokes like Wally.'* (56)

Les is less trustful of friendship in a time of war, saying: *'safe first, friends later'* (131). However later, he acknowledges: *'This bloody war. A man forgets how to trust people.'* (250)

- a) Do you think Frank is a good friend? Why/not?
- b) Describe the friendship between A'ata and Frank throughout the book. Does it change? If so, in what way?
- c) Describe the friendship between Les and Frank throughout the book. Does it change? If so, in what way?
- d) Describe the friendship between Wally and Frank throughout the book. Does it change? If so, in what way?
- e) What changes do you see in Frank by the end of the book?

## Themes

In groups, discuss the following themes and questions in relation to the novel.

- 1) **Bravery comes in different forms: there are more ways than one of being a hero.**

*'It's me, Frank told himself. I'm the only one who can make this work. I'm doing the job of a real soldier.'* (185)

*'If they did catch him, what would he do? Would he be brave like he'd promised himself, to keep protecting Betty and the others?'* (205)

*'He's a human being like me, Frank understood. And he's a kid, almost. If I do this, I'll be guilty for as long as I live.'* (215)

- 2) **Friendships are one of the most important things in life.**

Frank says: *'Thank you,' said Frank. 'Thank you — friend.'* to A'ata. (224)

*'Wally's voice was quiet, as usual. 'We'd all sooner be with our mates, pal. But we'll save some lives if we do this job properly.'* (105)

Les says: *'Safe first, friends later'* (131). However later, he acknowledges: *'This bloody war. A man forgets how to trust people.'* (250)

- 3) **We all live knowing we will die; in this shared knowledge comes beauty and thankfulness for living:**

*'He'd never be totally safe, as long as he lived.'* (58) *'Frank remembered their soldier companion's description of his brother taking off to face the Jap fighter planes as they attacked. He tried to think of something to say, and couldn't.'* (132)



*'As he swam, trying to keep his chin and the notebook above water, he promised himself again — when this was over, he was going to live the best life he possibly could. The best for everybody. I will, he told himself, in the blackness of a night where men somewhere were still hunting and fighting. I will.'* (247)

- a) Together, rank these themes from most important to least important. Use evidence from the book to support your ideas.
- b) Choose your top theme and write a paragraph telling us why you think it is the most important. Share with the class and discuss.
- c) Write an essay using a proper 'hamburger' structure explaining why your theme is the most important in the book.

## Writing Style and Language Activities

### DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE

#### Similes and Metaphors:

This book uses similes and metaphors to make the story interesting to read. These techniques using comparison make it easier for readers to understand imagery.

**Metaphor:** a direct comparison; saying one thing IS another.

**Simile:** a comparison that uses like or as.

Here is an example of comparative descriptive language from early in the book.

- 1) He'd heard of boats being caught *like sitting ducks* on hidden underwater ledges' (11).
- 2) 'After five minutes, there was nothing but the *dark plain* of sea, the line of horizon, a few stars and the *towers of clouds* rising ahead. The island where he'd landed with high hopes just a day and a half before was a *thin smudge* behind them.' (79)



- a) Explain these examples. How is 1) a simile?  
How are the underlined examples in 2) metaphors?
- b) Find two of your own similes from the book. How do the comparisons work in these examples?
- c) Find two of your own metaphors from the book. How do the comparisons work in these examples?

### **Alliteration:**

What effect does alliteration generally have in writing?

**Explain the effect of the alliteration in the following examples from the book:**

- a) *Turning trees to splintered stumps* (12)
- b) *Tiny white, gold and pink grains glittered in the sunlight.* (13)
- c) *The launch turned, little waves slapping at its sides. The motor murmured, and they were heading out to sea.* (78)
- d) *The driver was left sitting in the smashed and smoking cab ...* (51)
- e) *The smoking, steaming shape ...* (52)
- f) *... others ladled food and poured tea for the grinning, gossiping queues forming in front of them* (52)
- g) *The sun slipped from sight* (75)

### **Incomplete and short sentences:**

David Hill uses short and incomplete sentences to create an effect in parts of his writing. Here are some examples:

- i) *Movement and sounds on both sides. (15)*
- ii) *Movement along to the right. (23)*
- iii) *The sun slipped from sight. The jungle grew darker every minute. The beach was empty. Men and lorries were gone. (75)*

Why does he do this? What is the effect on the reader?



# After Reading

## Further Research and Creative Activities

- 1) As New Zealanders, we have family and ancestry with direct experience of World War 2. Ask a family member to share a story or a person with you from this time. It might be a grandparent or parent telling you about a family member's experience during the war. Make notes and write a personal report or essay detailing their experience.
- 2) Research Pidgin language. Where did it come from? Who speaks it? Present your research as a poster.
- 3) Read about one of WW2's only female coastwatchers here: <https://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/semaphore-07-17> and here: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/australias-only-female-world-war-ii-coastwatcher-170879?page=0%2C1>
- 4) Go to your local museum and visit any exhibitions on World War 2 and/or the Pacific region. What did you learn?
- 5) What do you know about tuberculosis in New Zealand? Research and make a powerpoint to present to your class.
- 6) Choose a part of the book you enjoyed and write it from A'ata's point of view. Aim for 1-2 pages.
- 7) What do you know about Māori involvement in World War 2? Research with another person as a pair and present to small groups in class.