



TEACHERS' RESOURCES



Secrets at Red Rocks Rachael King

PLOT SUMMARY

While holidaying at his father's house, Jake explores Wellington's wild south coast, with its high cliffs, biting winds, and its fierce seals.

When he stumbles upon a perfectly preserved sealskin, hidden in a crevice at Red Rocks, he's compelled to take it home and hide it under his bed, setting off a chain of events that threatens to destroy his family.

Red Rocks takes the Celtic myth of the selkies, or seal people, and transplants it into the New Zealand landscape, throwing an ordinary boy into an adventure tinged with magic.

With its beautiful writing and eerie atmosphere, junior readers will be thrilled and moved by this captivating story.

RECOMMENDED FOR Ages 8+ (Years 4 to 8)

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- Learning areas: English
- General capabilities: Literacy; Critical and creative thinking; Ethical understanding

REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

An exciting blend of myth and adventure set in Aotearoa New Zealand

THEMES

- Fairytales and mythology
- Family relationships
- Power and betrayal
- Bullying
- Animal cruelty
- Helping others
- Conservation and environmental activism

PUBLICATION DETAILS

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Secrets at Red Rocks by Rachael King

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rachael King is an award-winning writer, reviewer, and former literary festival director from Aotearoa New Zealand. She loves music and started playing bass guitar in rock bands when she was 15, but these days spends more time listening. When Rachael was young, she tried to ride every horse she met and could often be found galloping bareback along a beach with the wind in her hair. She's the author of two standalone novels for children: *Secrets at Red Rocks* (formerly titled *Red Rocks*) in 2012, which won the 2013 Esther Glen Medal and has been turned into a television series by Libertine Pictures; and *The Grimmelings* (2024), which was published in New Zealand, Australia and the UK, and won a Storylines Notable Junior Fiction Award. A chapter book series, *Violet and the Velvets*, launched in 2025. Her novels for adult readers, *The Sound of Butterflies* and *Magpie Hall*, were published in nine languages altogether. Rachael received a Waitangi Day Honour Award in 2020 from the New Zealand Society of Authors and in 2023 she was named Best Reviewer at the Voyager New Zealand Media Awards.

AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

Secrets at Red Rocks, originally published in 2012 as *Red Rocks*, was Rachael's first novel for children. The idea for *Red Rocks* came to her as she walked her first baby son around Wellington's wild south coast and thought it a place where magic could happen. This and her second novel for young people, *The Grimmelings*, reflect her love for, and obsession with, Scottish folklore – the weirder the better.

BEFORE READING

Questions and activities

1. What does the cover picture indicate that the book is about?
2. When and where might the story be set?
3. What does the title suggest to you?
4. What do you think the genre of this book is? List the aspects that are indicative of this genre.

LANGUAGE

Questions and activities

1. The story is told in the third person. Why do you think the author chose to do this? Was it effective? Choose a passage in the book and rewrite it in the first-person narrative.
2. Figurative language is used to convey ideas that might otherwise be difficult to express. Two examples of figurative language are similes and metaphors. An example of a simile is 'a row of seals . . . watched him, like a row of sentries guarding the sea' (p. 99). An example of a metaphor is 'Her eyes were black coals throbbing in her face' (p. 196). Find more examples of each type of figurative language from the book.
3. The author uses symbolism in the book. Explain what the following phrases might symbolise:
 - 'made him see red' (p. 15)
 - 'danced like a whirling dervish' (p. 110)
 - 'her voice made a beeline for my heart' (p. 179)
 - 'as happy as a clam' (p. 242)
4. The author uses personification to describe elements of nature. For example, 'Waves battered the beach, chattering to the stones as they receded' (p. 7) and 'the wind, and the cliffs behind the house, which stretched and leaned in and moaned' (p. 69). Write a poem or descriptive paragraph using personification about other forces of nature.



- The author uses animal imagery in some similes. For example, 'only its little face poked out, like a marsupial in a pouch' (p. 32) and 'the island emerged like a giant crouching turtle' (p. 118). Think of ten other animals and create a simile for each.
- Jake uses a simile from nature to describe Cara when he says 'she shone like the sun' (p. 70). Find some love poetry and list the types of similes used. Write your own love poem.
- What figure of speech are the words 'bump and lurch' (p. 32) examples of? Find five more examples of this figure of speech from the book. Write a poem or descriptive paragraph which includes these words.
- Find definitions for the following words from the novel and write one sentence using each:
 - tentatively (p. 11)
 - fissure (p. 13)
 - taunting (p. 32)
 - emanated (p. 77)
 - incredulous (p. 78)
 - impediment (p. 87)
 - sombre (p. 89)
 - abated (p. 94)
 - diluting (p. 193)
 - mesmerised (p. 194)
- Draw a picture of one of the characters based on their physical descriptions. For example:
 - Ted (p. 11)
 - Jessie (p. 61)
 - Dan (p. 149)
- Write a character summary of Jake, Ted, Dad, Cara or Jessie.
- Which character did you particularly like or dislike? Why?

CHARACTERS

Questions and activities

- Think of three adjectives to describe Jake.
- List the qualities of Jake's personality and find examples of when he displays each of these qualities.
- Choose an important event from the novel and describe Jake's reaction to it.
- What do you think Jake learns in this book? How do you think he has changed by the end of the book? How do you think his view of himself has changed?
- How does the relationship between Jake and his dad develop through the book? What are the main events which contribute to the development?

THEMES

Questions and activities

Discuss the following themes and find examples from the book which illustrate each one.

- animal cruelty
- bullying
- helping others
- the definition and importance of family relationships
- fairytale and mythology
- betrayal and power

CREATIVE RESPONSES

Questions and activities

- Jake thinks about his family in Auckland and what they might be doing (pp. 8–9). Write a description of what the members of your family might be doing right now.
- Jake mentions the places where his family live in New Zealand (pp. 8–9). Find other New Zealand places that are mentioned in the book. Locate these places on a map of New Zealand. Choose one of the places mentioned. Create and design an entry for a travel book for your chosen place. Include information such as population, geography, history, sites of interest, weather, etc.
- Jake talks about having a half-sister (p. 8). Draw his family tree. Draw your own family tree.



4. Jake imagines what he will be like as a grown-up (p. 10). Write a description of what you think you will look like as a grown-up and then draw a picture based on this description.
5. Because Jake had been enjoying science at school he thinks he could be a conservationist and work for Forest and Bird or Greenpeace (p. 10). What are these organisations? Where are they based? What do they do? What is their mission? Where would you like to work when you grow up? Which subjects will you need? What would your work entail? See if you can arrange to be an intern or shadow a worker at the company of your choice. Write a report of your experience and present it to your class.
6. Jake feels the tug of living near the sea even though he lives in the city (p. 10). Where would you like to live and why?
7. The author includes many descriptions of exteriors and interiors throughout the book, including:
 - Ted's shack (p. 10 and p. 41)
 - Dad's house (p. 16)
 - The cottage with the windmills (pp. 28–29)
 - Dad's writing shed (p. 54)
 - Mum's house in Auckland (p. 91)Draw one of these places based on their descriptions in the book, then describe and draw an interior and exterior space of your choice.
8. Jake stops to watch fish, starfish and sea anemones in a rock pool (p. 13). Write a descriptive paragraph or poem about another animal you might find in a rock pool.
9. Jake finds the seal skin in 'a mini cave, perfect for hiding pirate's treasure!' (p. 13.) Find a book about pirates, such as *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson. Write a book/author study about the book you have chosen.
10. The cruelty of the people who club baby seals to death makes Jake ashamed to be human (p. 15). What makes you ashamed to be human? Find out about an organisation that relates to this. Write a letter, create a campaign or design a website to help make your cause known.
11. Dad writes books about New Zealand wildlife (p. 17). Use a publishing company's website to find out about how to write a book proposal. Choose some wildlife found in your local area and write a book proposal on your chosen subject.
12. Jake imagines stories of 'mermaids and sailing ships, of sharp-toothed fish and whales the size of houses' (p. 33). Find a traditional tale or story about the sea which includes one of the items from Jake's imaginings. Rewrite the tale then make it into an illustrated children's book or graphic comic.
13. Jake would like to find a boat then 'jump in it and let the sea carry him wherever it liked' (p. 33). Look at a map of the world. Where would you like to travel to? Find out if you can get there by boat and how long it would take. Chart your route and write an imaginary travel log or journal of your nautical adventure.
14. Jake imagines the woman from the fish and chip shop floating away (pp. 33–34). Draw or paint this scene.
15. Ted compares his cottage to Grand Central Station (p. 42). What is this building? Where is it located? What other famous buildings and landmarks are in this city? Choose one to study. What famous buildings and landmarks are there in your local area or country? What is their purpose?
16. Jake expects that Ted may have 'some crazy cake that if he ate it would make him grow as tall as a house, or maybe shrink down to the size of a garden gnome' (p. 42). What famous story does this refer to? Find the story and read it.
17. There are a lot of crossword puzzle books in Ted's house (p. 45). Make up your own crossword using answers and clues taken from the book.
18. Dad and Ted talk about seals and little blue penguins (pp. 62–63). Find other animals mentioned in the book and research them. For example, what do they look like, what are their habitats, calls, etc? Write an illustrated report of your findings.
19. Jake teaches Jessie how to play card games, such as poker (p. 73) and Snap (p. 92). Design an instruction manual describing the rules of one of your favourite card games. Teach the game to your classmates.



20. The book is full of dramatic, suspense-filled action sequences, for example:

- when Jake is attacked by the seal (pp. 76–77)
- Cara's frenzied search for the skin (pp. 195–197)
- Jake returning the skin (pp. 208–214)

Write a dramatic action scene about something that has happened to you.

21. Jessie tells Jake about selkies or seal people (p. 81). What other mythical creatures can you think of? If you were a mythical creature what would you look like and which magical powers would you choose to possess? Briefly describe how you came to have these powers.

22. Jake's ancestors come from Ireland (p. 81). Research where your ancestors came from.

23. Listening to the rain falling on the corrugated iron roof is usually a comforting sound for Jake because it reminds him of holidays with his father (p. 89). Sounds can evoke memories. Think of a sound and the memories it evokes for you. Write a poem about it.

24. The author describes Jake and Dad's fishing trip (pp. 106–111). Write an extended description of something you like doing.

25. Jake wonders if the seal is really showing him and his dad the way home (p. 117). Find an example of when animals have helped people. Write your findings up as either as newspaper article or a news broadcast.

26. Jake feels truly happy sitting with his father by the fire (p. 121). Write a descriptive paragraph about a time or situation when you have felt or do feel truly happy.

27. Dad tells Jake that the selkie story comes from Celtic cultures (p. 122). Find another traditional Celtic story. Write it out and then tell it to your class.

28. If he could be transformed into another creature Jake would like to be a bird or a dolphin (p. 125). Imagine you could turn into an animal for a day. Which would you choose and why? Write about your transformation and your day as the animal of your choice.

29. In the car park at the beginning of the beach is an unmanned information centre (p. 148). Design and create an information centre booth for your local area. Include information on the local wildlife, geology and myths, etc.

30. There is so much Jake wants to ask Jessie about being a selkie (p. 224). Divide into pairs. Imagine one of you is Jake and write a questionnaire as him, and imagine the other of you is Jessie and answer Jake's questions as she might.

31. Jake will always remember the road out to Red Rocks as 'windswept and sullen' (p. 244). Write a haiku about a place in nature that is special to you.

32. Design a health and safety pamphlet on the issues below that are mentioned in the book:

- stranger danger (p. 12 and p. 50)
- bullying (p. 31 and p. 166)
- outdoor education and survival (p. 38 and p. 113)
- water safety (p. 37 and p. 105)

33. Without speaking, act out a character doing something from the book. See how quickly the class can guess who you are and what you are doing.

34. Design your own cover for the novel.

35. Imagine the novel is going to be turned into a stage play. Design the costumes for each character and one or two stage sets.

36. This novel has been turned into a television series. Look at it and other television series posters. Notice the pictures and the words. Design your own poster to advertise a new television adaptation or film of this novel.

37. Get into groups of two or three. Choose a scene from the novel. Write a script and act it out in front of the class.

38. Write a review of the book, aiming it at the readership of your favourite magazine, newspaper or website.

39. Write your own version of the back cover blurb.

40. Choose one of the descriptive passages in the novel which you find particularly effective and use it to set the scene or the mood for your own piece of descriptive writing. Quote the passage as the epigraph for your work and clearly state the source (title, author, publisher, date, chapter and page number).



PRAISE FOR THE NOVEL

‘A sad, sweet and slightly creepy selkie tale for children. With a southern-hemisphere setting, for a change.’

— Margo Lanagan, author of *Sea Hearts/The Brides of Rollrock Island*

‘Rachael King . . . works magic in *Red Rocks*, her first novel for younger readers . . . A gentler exploration of the [selkie] myth than Margo Lanagan’s *Sea Hearts*, this is equally convincing.’ — Ann Packer, *NZ Listener*

‘It’s the school holidays; usually, Jake lives with his mum and stepfather in Auckland. With dad, he enjoys relative freedom. He explores the coast and finds the selkie’s hidden skin. A cracking yarn follows. It’s not just a great story, with unexpected twists. It’s also a lovely evocation of that stretch of Wellington coast.’ — Phillip Matthews, *Your Weekend*

‘A must read for readers who love animals, a bit of magic, and stories about family. Rachael King is the author of two adult novels and won the Montana Book Awards for the Best First Novel in 2007. This is her first children’s book and I hope she writes many more!’ — Adele Broadbent

‘*Red Rocks* is a magical adventure story, set in New Zealand, that children and adults alike will love. Rachael King has taken the Celtic myth of the selkies and transplanted it into a New Zealand setting that kiwi kids will relate to . . . There is a hint of darkness running throughout the story and you get a feeling of foreboding right from the start . . . One thing that I particularly love about *Red Rocks* is Rachael King’s beautiful writing. She’s very descriptive so she paints a vivid picture of the wild, windy coast. It’s the sort of book that you want to read snuggled up in bed because you almost feel the biting wind and the freezing ocean. 5 out of 5 stars.’ — Zac Harding, *My Best Friends Are Books*

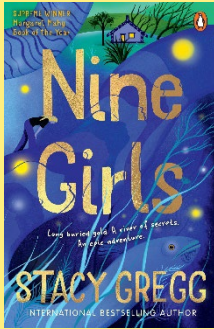
‘The language is rich, warm and slightly mysterious, like the cover, and the seals themselves are beautifully described as they gambol in the waves and kelp, or dive into the water like a “silky missile” . . . This is a story of enchantment, but also of a boy finding the inner strength to solve problems, fight bullies, protect his family and conquer his fear.’

— Phillipa Werry, *Beatties Book Blog*

‘An exciting tale . . . that will keep young readers on their toes.’ — Bob Docherty, *Bob’s Book Blog*



FURTHER READING FROM PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE



Nine Girls by Stacy Gregg

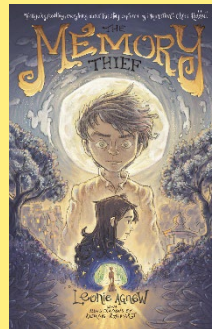
Titch is determined to find the gold buried on her family's land. It might be cursed but that won't put her off.

Then an unexpected encounter with a creature from the river reveals secrets lying beneath its surface . . .

As Titch uncovers the truth about the hidden treasure, she learns about her own heritage — and what it's like to feel like an outsider in your own world.

An epic story woven with suspense – winner of the 2024 Margaret Mahy Book of the Year and the Esther Glen Award for Junior Fiction!

Teachers' resources available.



The Memory Thief by Leonie Agnew

Seth has been trapped behind the iron bars of the public gardens for as long as he can remember. By day he's frozen as a statue of a shepherd boy, but as soon as the sun sets he roams the park, ravenously hungry. He is a troll – the food he seeks is human memories.

Then he meets Stella, the first person he doesn't see as a meal. But there is someone in the garden who does.

A magical novel about a girl who wants to escape her memories and a troll who is trying to remember his, for fans of Neil Gaiman and Chris Riddell!

Teachers' resources available.



Masher by Fifi Colston

What would you do if you accidentally created a barking-mad glove puppet?

Twelve-year-old Freddie Foxworthy just wants to do arts and crafts. He finds them a lot easier to deal with than his peers. But when ashes from a dead bull terrier get into his papier-mache, he accidentally makes a growling puppet with an unpredictable mouth!

A quirky laugh-out-loud tale for crafty types, about finding friends, along with finding your happy place – and instructions for making your own glove puppet!

Teachers' resources available.



ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QTY	TOTAL
<i>Secrets at Red Rocks</i>	Rachael King	9781776953462	4-10	\$22		
<i>Nine Girls</i>	Stacy Gregg	978177695814	4-10	\$22		
<i>The Memory Thief</i>	Leonie Agnew	9780143775720	4-8	\$22		
<i>Masher</i>	Fifi Colston	9780143775683	3-8	\$18.99		
TOTAL						

<p>NAME: _____</p> <p>SCHOOL: _____</p> <p>ADDRESS: _____</p> <p>STATE: _____</p> <p>POSTCODE: _____</p> <p>TEL: _____</p> <p>EMAIL: _____</p> <p>ACCOUNT NO.: _____</p> <p>PURCHASE ORDER NO.: _____</p>	<p>PLEASE SEND ORDER FORMS TO YOUR LOCAL EDUCATION SUPPLIER.</p>
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