

TEACHING NOTES: NANOTECH by Denis Wright [Submarine, 2015]

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The following activities are pitched at year 11 students, although could be readily adapted to other year levels. My intention with this novel, and with these activities, is to stimulate thought and discussion about some provocative issues.

I believe the novel is very well suited to answering NCEA level 1 Written Text theme and character questions. These exercises should provide students with ample 'ammunition' to reach excellence level. These questions from the 2014 NCEA Level 1 Written Text paper would work particularly well.

'Describe at least one important idea the writer developed throughout the written text. Explain how this idea helped you understand an important message for teenagers.'

'Describe at least one important conflict in the written text. Explain how this conflict helped you to understand one or more characters or individuals in the text.'

'Describe at least one character or individual you could relate to in the written text. Explain why being able to relate to the character or individual was important to the text as a whole.'

Plot and character questions

Prologue

1. What is the purpose of this prologue? Why not just start straight into Chapter One?
2. What questions does the prologue raise about our first person narrator?

Chapter one

1. What do you see as Bernie's most positive attributes?
2. Can you suggest any personality traits that could foreshadow future problems?
3. Write a summary sentence for each of the main characters – include a short quote from each that seems to sum up their individual personalities.

Chapter two

1. What does the bickering between the students, prior to Bernie's arrival, reveal about the group dynamic?
2. How do you think the author 'shows' the reader how the characters relate to each other rather than 'tells' you about this – is it an effective approach? why?
3. Why is Bernie so enraptured by Professor Meinhoff?
4. What are the ethical issues that grip the students so intently?
5. What do you think about the way Bernie organised the trip to Auckland?

6. What alarm bells might this raise about her personality?

Chapter three

1. How do Joe's actions on the trip to Auckland contradict the impression he has tried to establish about himself?
2. Can you see any foreshadowing of future events involving Bernie in this short chapter?

Chapter four

1. What is your opinion on the girls' anger at Bernie's late arrival back to the motel unit?
2. What sweeping stereotypes are made early in this chapter?
3. List four things that particularly alarmed Joe from Nothing Moment # 301.
4. What are your initial impressions of the three men when they are confronting the group?
5. Imagine that the kidnapping outside the museum as a scene from a movie. Draw a still camera shot of what you consider to be the high point of the action.

Chapter five

1. For some readers the language in this chapter, and some others, is likely to be a problem. What is your opinion on my use of swearing in the dialogue? Build a case both for and against.
2. Bernie 'steps up' in this chapter. What is her strategy to ensure the safety of the students?
3. What is the point of the flashback on page 75?

Chapter six

1. In what ways is the tramping hut typical of tramping huts in New Zealand?
2. What is Meinhoff's view of the NAB?
3. Do the NAB aims and tactics remind you of other groups operating in the world today?
4. Do you think the gunshot on page 80 was staged? Why or why not?
5. Why, in this chapter, does Joe find Drew more frightening than Marcus and Lou?
6. Why does Lou get so angry with Joe in this chapter?

Chapter seven

1. Comment on the effectiveness of the simile on page 90 that compares the 'big, fat ugly words' to 'helium balloons'.
2. Account for the conflict developing between Lou and Drew.
3. How feasible did you think it was for Drew to be able to understand the professor's secrets?

4. Explain how Bernie cleverly manipulates this scene so that characters unconsciously slip into role.
5. What is Moira's view on boys' educational underachievement and what critique of her views does Toke make?
6. What raw nerves does Toke touch with Drew in this chapter?
7. Does the hard upbringing Drew describes justify his racist attitudes ?
8. There are several comic moments in this chapter. Describe one and explain what is comedic about it.

Chapter eight

1. How is Marcus's and Lou's erosion of power shown in this chapter?

Chapter nine

1. What is your opinion on Joe's claim that he has been a 'pretty good narrator so far'? Any suggestions for things he could have improved?
2. What event earlier in the novel foreshadows by Lou's pistol tapping routine?
3. List the similarities Lou has to Paddy.
4. What drove Joe into his selective muteness, and why? And then what drove him back to speaking again?

Chapter ten

1. We already know why Joe likes Indya so much, but what did she find attractive about Joe?
2. Why does Joe find her feeling difficult to believe?

Chapter eleven

1. Describe the scene that greets Joe when he looks through the hut window.
2. What is Tommy's strategy to get the gun off Indya?
3. Summarise Eve's and Moira's opposing views about the nature of Bernie's departure.
4. Explain the term 'Shakespearean numbers of dead bodies'.

Chapter twelve

1. Account for Indya's 'new, brittle voice'. (page 162)
2. What incorrect assumptions do the police make in this chapter?

Chapter thirteen

1. What did Joe mean on page 167 when he says 'guess it comes back to stereotypes'?
2. In what ways do we see the old Moira returning in this chapter, and in what ways do we see a new Joe and a new Indya?

Chapter fourteen

1. What does Toke mean on page 174 when he says 'I'm a bit of a student of human nature'? Give two previous examples of this.

2. In what ways is Andy's behaviour in this chapter very out of character?
3. Why does Joe's answer to Toke's question 'Any clues?' (middle of page 180) cause Toke to have a coughing fit?

Chapter fifteen

1. What do you make of Bernie's manner (page 183) when she welcomes the group inside?
2. Comment on Bernie's explanation of her behaviour (pages 185 – 188). What might your reaction have been if you were one of the students?
3. What does Toke mean when he refers to himself as an 'experience junkie'?
4. What do you think about Indya's guesses about Bernie's background?
5. According to Joe in what ways is Bernie's betrayal of the students 'right up there'? (page 192)
6. Who were Bonnie and Clyde and what happened to them?
7. What does Indya mean on page 194 when she shouts 'Playing games again!' ?
8. Find my mistake on page 197. [First edition only]
9. Give several ways Joe's decisive actions on page 198 have been foreshadowed in the novel.
10. What is the double meaning in Bernie's reply 'Yes, he was the only one'.

Epilogue

1. Do you feel any sympathy for Bernie? Give an explanation for your answer.
2. Why is Joe worried by Toke's engagement with school activities?
3. What is Eve's way of coping with the trauma of recent events?
4. In what ways were the students 'putting it on'? (top of page 207)
5. What does Joe's dad assume the news to be? (page 210)
6. What is your view on the changing relationship between Joe and Indya?
7. In some ways this is a 'happy ending'. Suggest an alternative, but still believable, ending.

Longer answer theme or issues-based activities

1. How are different aspects of betrayal explored in this novel?
2. How do people deal with trauma in the novel?
3. In what ways does the novel question our tendencies to make assumptions about people based on stereotypes?
4. In what ways does the novel explore the concept of nurture vs nature?
5. How can children be empowered to resist sexual abuse, or will they always lack the power to be able to act effectively against it?
6. Investigate some national and international examples of race-hate crimes and come to conclusions on the causes of this type of hatred.
7. Is there such a thing as 'repressed memory'? Research and discuss.

8. What is the role of the New Zealand Race Relations Conciliator? Research two recent cases before the Conciliator.
9. Research the 'Stockholm syndrome', with particular reference to the case of American heiress Patty Hearst. Do you think this condition may have a part to play in Bernie's fatal attraction to Drew?
10. Hold class debates on the following moots
 - Science must always be regulated by morality.
 - High school teachers teach students, not subjects.
 - This country needs to spend more on scientific research.
 - Space exploration is an indefensible waste of money.
 - It is human nature to discriminate against others.
 - Girls are more suited to the current education system than boys.

Role-play exercises

1. Ask your students to speak to the class 'in role' as one of the student in the novel. They speak of their experiences and then field questions from the class.
2. Towards the end of the novel the police inform the students that there is huge media attention on what happened to them. Stage a media conference where the students are interviewed on their experiences. Someone will need to play a police inspector to control the situation and to shield the 'students' from inappropriate questions.
3. Imagine that Drew and Bernie do escape, but are eventually captured. Hold a court case (or a police interrogation) where Bernie's involvement is under scrutiny.
4. Select a dramatic incident from the novel, for example the shooting of Tommy or the 'classroom' in the hut incident. Script it using the actual dialogue from the novel and make a short film of the incident. Make sure you do a storyboard first. Think carefully about the use of camera angles to position and manipulate viewer emotion.
5. The hut 'classroom' scene was performed by Wellington High School students and teachers at the launch of Nanotech. The script by Alison Hodge, based closely on the book, is available on makaropress.co.nz and is free to use.