



Teaching and Learning Resource for THE BOOK OF HAT by Harriet Rowland (Submarine Books 2014)

ISBN 978-0-473-27285-2 • paperback • B format • 208 pp • RRP \$25; \$1 to CanTeen

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AVAILABLE AT ENGLISHONLINE.TKI.ORG.NZ <http://bit.ly/1fzehPt>

www.thebookofhat.com & www.makaropress.co.nz

- designed to provide teachers with suggested activities and possible approaches to teaching *The Book of Hat*
- not prescriptive but has in mind the requirements for achievement standards taught in NZ secondary schools
- suitable for Years 11–13 but could be successful with junior classes

The Book of Hat is recommended as a basis for units of work that look at:

- connections between texts
- a theme study
- a study of the 'diary' or 'confessional' genre
- students' own writing
- companion texts: *The Fault in Our Stars* & *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Introduction

Harriet Rowland — known as Hat — was 17 when she was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, a rare form of cancer that began in her knee. At the time she was a student at Queen Margaret College in Wellington, New Zealand.

Going through treatment was often a lonely time, as friends — while supportive — didn't always understand Hat's new life. This was until she fell in love with the character Hazel Grace from John Green's novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, a girl who talks honestly and openly about living with cancer. Like her, Hat found life changed in ways that were both good and bad: falling in love and hospital stays among them. And she was surprised by how much happiness there was still to find.

Throughout her journey, Hat kept a blog called *My Experience of Walking the Dog*, and this book is a collection of those posts edited with the author. Why the blog title? Her parents say cancer is like a dog — fine if it stays in its own yard. Hat's dog got out. This is her unexpected story.

'THIS WAY I WILL NEVER HAVE TO GET A JOB, LEARN HOW TO COOK MORE THAN TWO-MINUTE NOODLES OR DO ANYTHING MILDLY PRODUCTIVE. I NEVER HAVE TO GROW UP AND I CAN FOREVER BE A KID! THOUGH MY 'FOREVER' IS SHORTER THAN MOST, I DON'T MIND. WHAT I DO MIND IS THAT I AM GOING TO HAVE TO LEAVE EVERYONE I LOVE BEHIND.'
HAT

HARRIET ROWLAND was a reader. She was also a talented wordsmith who wrote from age 17 to 20 years. Her book is an excellent example of someone who instinctively made connections with her world and the world of books and literature. It would be useful for you to have read (if you haven't already) *The Diary of Anne Frank* and John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (TFIOS) because Harriet references them as significant during her struggle with terminal cancer. She hoped her book would help people - perhaps give them a friend as she was given one in Hazel Grace and Anne Frank. Your students, hopefully, will find 'the circle of this connection rather wonderful - three young women in different times, real and not real, and all writing, becoming friends.' (Mary McCallum, *The Book of Hat* editor and publisher.) The reading experience will be sad because we know that Harriet has died but the journey, like many great texts, is worth any tears. The work is surprisingly uplifting, too.

Read either Anne Frank's diary or TFIOS as a class first as 'base' study then read *The Book of Hat*.

Doing a 'compare and contrast' exercise with these texts will help students to see what all writers do (i.e. carefully select what they write and how they write it) and that readers like Harriet – and even fictional ones like Hazel Grace – read with an awareness of other people's stories.

- Compare settings: time and place. Interesting that much of the time, Harriet was 'confined' to hospital or home or by her lack of immunity; like Hazel Grace, she was almost always 'attached' (bound) by the oxygen tubes or other medical interventions which helped her to live.
- Compare the idea of fighting or resisting a battle –Anne's with the Jews versus the Nazis, and Hazel and Harriet battling terminal cancer.
- Family response to situation: how do other members of a family cope with and react to trauma, fear, danger?
- Relationships in particular romantic love, as well as mother/daughter, father/daughter, mother/father interactions.

Teach the importance of audience and purpose.

- Consider the difference it makes writing for one person (in a secretive manner like Anne) with Harriet's writing which was public (for her blog and then published).
- How does what you are writing about and who you are writing for affect selection of material to include in the diary? How much do you think a writer 'self-edits'?
- Consider the publisher's comments: 'In my experience the really good writers are also open to revising and editing their work. Hat loved reading and wanted her book to be a BOOK book not a BLOG book - so she was always happy to discuss edits for clarification and to avoid repetition, even when she was dying. Also there were times when she had what she calls 'chemo brain' and the blog writing rambles a bit, and this needed a bit of sorting out. We agreed the Plan B blog in the middle [writing when she was well and travelling] unbalanced the book, too – it's hard reading about someone's fab holiday for long ... so Hat happily and cleverly condensed it.'

Ask your students to imagine that the characters from both TFIOS and *The Diary of Anne Frank* were able to meet with each other and Harriet; get them to describe what they think might happen; what might be said. This could develop into a short play or radio drama or animated film.

Your students might like to make memes with some of Harriet's memorable quotes. Go to <http://memegenerator.net> or similar sites.

Use TBOH as a template for personal writing:

- Why is it necessary to write down personal experiences?
- How do you choose what to include and what to leave out?
- Look at the word choice (and the connotations for these words) on the TONE of the entry. For example, the publisher notes that: 'The word 'amazing' is a favourite of Hat's, but it only really kicks in around page 40. It is as if once she comes to terms with the news, Hat decides her position on cancer: that life is 'amazing' and she's 'lucky', and she will love the world, live in the moment, and go out fighting. She ends the book: "I won because I lived" and then a quote about dancing in the rain.'
- Look at the structure of each blog post or 'chapter'. This would tie in tidily to a consideration of serialised narrative and could be linked to popular television programmes which have a resolvable problem each episode as well as a series length problem/mystery to be sorted by the protagonist(s). Each chapter of Harriet's book is 'self-contained' with magazine article title, hooks and completeness to it.
- Compare one of the blog entries to its corresponding chapter in the book. What changes were made in the editing process? Why do you think these were made?

Specifically for senior classes

- Use TBOH as either a core text (to study for 1.1 or 2.1) and/or as a springboard text for the connections and personal reading standards and for writing folios.
- Teach tone and how words selected affect the overall mood of passages; the way humour is used by authors during sad moments, and why.
- A technical discussion could include how Harriet constructed each chapter. Consider the publisher's comment about structure and style: "Every heading nailed it – we only tweaked two due to slight misspells – and her blog posts are concise and constructed to engage the reader. They begin with an anecdote to grab the attention, then they open things up in the middle and offer some thoughts – perhaps some worries but very few – humour (nearly always), some 'amazings', and a reference to dogs or cancer as a dog – and she always tried to end on an up note or with something that would inspire people. The amazing thing is this all came naturally to her – the blog posts were written quickly and went up unedited."
- Consider what is NOT said and why.

Direct Y13 students to use TBOH to explore the genre of diary writing or how stories have a cathartic function, how they can save and give meaning to life.

- Links could be made here with Plath, Hyde, Frame, Adcock. Consider the lens of 'confessional' writing.
- Students could consider Harriet's 'cancer as a dog' metaphor compared with Gus's 'unlit cigarette' metaphor.

Connection standards: TBOH will provide opportunity for depth of analysis for students who choose themes such as: black humour, the relationship between mothers and daughters, books about illness, love – and the tragedy when one or both die (linked with *Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra* for example), memoirs etc; connections could also be made with the narrative voice of a text: *The Great Gatsby*, *The God Boy*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *To Kill A Mockingbird* etc.

Students who have read *The Fault in Our Stars* and/or watched the film can connect their reading response to TBOH. They could include consideration to the following questions to help them with their response:

- What are your thoughts about someone writing a book like this?
- What do you think about the lessons Hat learned about herself, her friends, her family, having a terminal illness, life?
- Evaluate the opinions Hat gives. What do you think is Harriet's rule for living life?
- Consider her response to both TFIOS and visiting Anne Frank's home.

George Orwell, in his essay entitled 'Politics and the English Language' discusses 'four great motives for writing' (see below). In light of his comments, students could evaluate which of these motivated Harriet to firstly write her blog and, secondly to write her book. The publisher notes that, 'Harriet says it was a way of telling people she loved what was happening to her. But she had another motivation, which was to help people. I also suspect that like any writer, the act of writing helped Harriet.' Students could look at what Hat 'help' means in this context. As a further extension, they could also consider how Harriet's story might be told if different 'writing motives' were employed.

From George Orwell's 'Politics and the English Language' from *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* (Secker & Warburg, London, 1950).

Putting aside the need to earn a living, I think there are four great motives for writing, at any rate for writing prose. They exist in different degrees in every writer, and in any one writer the proportions will vary from time to time, according to the atmosphere in which he is living. They are:

1. Sheer egoism. Desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on the grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood, etc ... Writers share this characteristic with scientists, artists, politicians, lawyers, soldiers, successful businessmen — in short, with the whole top crust of humanity ... But there is also the minority of gifted, wilful people who are determined to live

their own lives to the end, and writers belong in this class. Serious writers, I should say, are on the whole more vain and self-centered than journalists, though less interested in money.

2. Aesthetic enthusiasm. Perception of beauty in the external world, or, on the other hand, in words and their right arrangement. Pleasure in the impact of one sound on another, in the firmness of good prose or the rhythm of a good story. Desire to share an experience which one feels is valuable and ought not to be missed ... Above the level of a railway guide, no book is quite free from aesthetic considerations.
3. Historical impulse. Desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity.
4. Political purpose. Using the word 'political' in the widest possible sense. Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other peoples' idea of the kind of society that they should strive after. Once again, no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.

Useful links:

www.thebookofhat.com

www.myexperienceofwalkingthedog.blogspot.com

www.makaropress.co.nz

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