

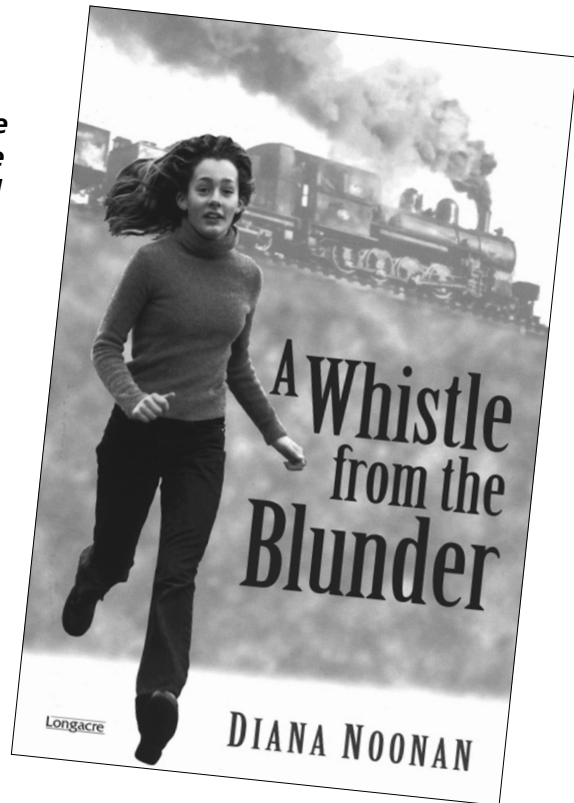
A Whistle from the Blunder

by DIANA NOONAN

She spun round to face the driver but the cab was empty. The men had gone and the train was thundering, uncontrolled, toward a flooded river and a bridge that long ago had disappeared. Cadence reached for the door again and as she did, rust spread over it like lichen and the handle fell away in her fingers.

When Cadence arrives to spend the holidays with her uncle and aunt in the remote township of Burchfield, she has no idea of the tragic past that lies buried there. Nor does she understand the significance of the house she's staying in, the old Station Master's house.

But when the haunting whistle of a long-forgotten steam train begins to wake her every morning, Cadence knows that something from the past isn't ready to be forgotten. And whether she likes it or not, she is going to have to put it right.



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Readership:
JUNIOR FICTION

Resource Kit

for use in schools

In this resource kit:

- Suggestions for guided and independent reading
- Exercises tailored for both boys and girls

The dramatic pace of the novel and its division into short chapters will make it excellent class or small group reading.

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Author's comment

From every window of the Waihola house that I lived in as a child, I could see the railway line. My earliest memories are of great clouds of white smoke billowing from the engines of steam trains, of orange flame flicking through long summer grass at the side of the track – the result of stray sparks from the engines' fire boxes – and of the hiss and roar of the mighty machines as they pulled in to the Waihola railway station. It is no wonder that one of the first picture books I ever wrote was called 'The Last Steam Train'.

Ever since my Waihola experiences, I have felt comfortable with trains. I like travelling on them, visiting them in museums, spotting apple trees along the side of disused railway tracks (the results of passengers tossing cores from windows), reading local rail history, and, more recently, cycling the Central Otago rail trail. It puzzles me that trains, and railway lines, once the heart and focus of many communities, should so suddenly disappear, and that motor cars and trucks, isolating, impersonal things, should have taken over the world of transport so completely. I like living in an area where I can still see the no-longer-used railway from the road.

Perhaps I wrote 'A Whistle From the Blunder' so that I could relive some of the romantic railway past that means so much to me. (I certainly wrote 'A Dolphin In the Bay' because I wanted the experience of being close to a dolphin, even if it was only in my imagination.) And into 'A Whistle From the Blunder' I wrote many of the railway 'bits and pieces' that are around me here in the Catlins where I live. The rotting piles of the decaying rail bridge march through the water of the Maclennan River not far from my home. The old red railway goods sheds, and stations, stuffed, now, with hay, are a familiar sight on many local farms.

In my wildest dreams I still have hope that my local railway line will, in some way, come to life again, perhaps with trampers hiking along the old rail route, perhaps through a tourist venture re-opening just a small section of the line. But until then, I can use my imagination to travel the Catlins line, and in 'A Whistle From the Blunder' steam trains can live again.



Diana Noonan

AS A CLASS:

'Finishing the painting.'

A story can be seen as a chain of events. Decide as a class what the main events in each chapter are. On a wall poster, draw a picture of a train engine. As each chapter is completed, add a carriage. (The students could design these on card or paper.) In each carriage give a brief description of each main event.

Comprehension Questions:

(NB: These questions can also be used to follow up small group or independent reading.)

Read pp 9-10: Does Cadence seem afraid? What does this suggest about her character straight away?

pp 11-12: What sort of personality does Uncle Ralph seem to have so far? Would he be fun to live with?

p 14: Use a dictionary to help you work out another way of describing an 'iron clad building'.

p 15: Why is Cadence staying with her aunt and uncle?

p 24: Cadence can't explain why the coat hooks scare her. Can you think of any reasons why they might be frightening?

p 26: Are there any things your family might have done which are like Cadence's mother vacuuming the table?

pp 26-28: How does Cadence feel about her aunt, Liz?

pp 30-31: List as many other ways of saying "hit the bottle" or "on the booze" as you can think of.

p 40: What is tourism? Can New Zealanders be tourists in New Zealand too?

p 42: Why is Cadence so overwhelmed when she overhears the woman from West Film talking on the phone?

p 48: Why were the men and boys taken off the train on the day of the Governor General's visit?

p 48: '[...] she had the copper boiling on the siding for tea when we got to the top.' Can you rewrite this so that someone who doesn't know what 'copper' and 'siding' mean will understand it? Use a dictionary.

p 50: Read the description of the rabbit closely. When Cadence compares Barney to this rabbit – when she uses a *simile* – how does it make us react to or feel about Barney?

pp 64-69: What is the Blunder?

- a mistake that Barney Abbott made many years ago
- a place on the railway line where the engineers built the track incorrectly

- (c) a small hill in the district of Burchfield
- (d) a landslide which fell onto the track and caused great damage

p 72: What does Cadence hear in the rain, and what does it make her think?

p 74: Why was Kim so worried about the rain?

p 76: Why is the railway line close to the river and the station master's house up on higher land?

p 77: Describe the difficulties the men who worked on the railway had on the night of the heavy rains in 1949.

p 79: What makes Ralph say it's not too dangerous to visit the Blunder at this point?

p 79: Why do you think people want someone to blame after a disaster?

p 80: Why is Kim pleased the car isn't hers?

p 88: When Kim starts to explore the old tunnel, why does she take so long?

p 106: Do you understand Cadence's reaction here, following the army rescue of Kim and the calf?

p 107: How many different ways does the author let us know that time has passed at the start of Chapter 23?

p 108: How did Barney Abbott and Liz know that there was trouble on the day of the flood?

p 112: Is this the first hint we have had that Liz might also have heard the train? If not, explain where else you have found clues that she has heard it.

p 115: List all of Barney Abbott's actions on the night of the accident. Why didn't he hear the whistle of the train?

p 118: When does Barney Abbott start drinking these days? Can you think of reasons why he might drink then?

pp 120-122: What are the two versions of how Cadence crossed the river on the day of the flood?

p 122: It turns out that Liz and Cadence share more than they expected. What do they share?

p 122: Liz seems to feel two ways about the past. Can you describe these? What is it that seems to change her mind about Barney Abbott?

p 123: Use a dictionary to find out what the word 'crazed' means in the phrase 'the pale blue lettering against the crazed china'.

Spelling:

Divide the class into 'Spelling Challenge teams'. Read out each word in turn from the list below. When you call out a word, the teams try to be first to ring a bell (or blow a train whistle!), to get the opportunity to spell the words below. Each correct answer earns five points. The members of the winning team receive a prize of your choice – e.g. the kind of sweets or ice cream sold in Mr Walker's shop; or liquorice straps – which you can also use as a starting point to discuss Noonan's simile on page 81.

gesticulation	debris	derelict
refrigerator	mantra	lichen
monogrammed	chug	skittle
cellophane	torrent	repercussions
microwave	raucous	sepia
verandah	lethargic	bachelor
fossicked	gauge	culverts
contorted	urgency	hypothermia
premonitions	unstoppable	myth
monologue	macrocarpas	condemns
pterodactyl	beacon	monograms

Vocabulary Exercise:

Pin the Trait to the Character

(NB: This exercise could also be done in small groups or by individuals.)

Make posters (e.g. from old magazines) to illustrate Liz, Josh, Ralph, Cadence, Barney, Mrs Gaynor, and Addison. The following adjectives or phrases could be used to describe various characters in the novel. Write them onto paper, ask the class to suggest which adjectives to pin to the character. (More able readers will realise that some adjectives could apply to more than one person.)

prim	daring	gossipy
sneaky	uncharitable	haunted
inventive	anxious	unhealthy
melancholy	poor	judgemental
jolly	curious	cheeky
selfish	heavy-drinker	dreamy
joking	untidy	sarcastic
defensive	inventive	disbelieving
sensitive	isolated	picky
imaginative	quick-thinking	conscientious
efficient	safety-conscious	confused
thrifty	orderly	over-worked

Listening Skills:

When-the-Wind-Whispers

Give one student one of the starting phrases below, either whispering it to them yourself, or showing it to them on a printed card. Get them to whisper it to their neighbour.

At the end of the game, relate the changes in the sentence to the idea of rumours in the novel (e.g. Mrs Gaynor's opinion of Barney.)

Phrases:

1. *A Whistle from the Blunder.*
2. *Very faintly, far away, like a deep and secret whisper ...*
3. *... a hollow whistle stirred the dust and silence.*
4. *Barney Abbott was the Burchfield station master.*
5. *Forty years after the line's closed, and he still hears the train.*
6. *... the people of this remote, forested valley experienced a tragedy that until now has never been fully understood.*
7. *Whenever it rains, I can hear her clear as a bell, the engine with Patrick O'Brien on board.*

Discussion Topics:

- As a class, debate whether the train Cadence heard was real.
- Ask the students to discuss what personal experiences they might have had that have helped the past to come alive for them. Museums, fairs, art galleries, photos, movies, theatre, other public performances, family stories, songs, marae visits, their own games, dreams, books?
- Have any of the students gone away to stay with relatives for a while? What were their experiences like? Would they go away to stay with these relations again if they were asked to?
- What are some of the class opinions on ghost stories? Does this novel feel like a ghost story? Are there any ghost stories they particularly remember?

For Advanced Readers:

pp 110-118

- Does the author feel that a knowledge of history is important?
- If ordinary people don't understand their own history, what sorts of things can happen?
- What are some of the different ways people learn about the history of a place? Are some methods more accurate than others?

Book Review section:

(NB: this can also be used as an independent reading exercise for students who might want to keep a reading diary as they progress on their own through the novel.)

Ask the students to give full answers, using complete sentences and offering full reasons for their response:

- What were your reactions to the opening chapter?
- What was the biggest surprise in the whole novel?
- What was the most frightening passage?
- Was any of the novel sad?
- Did any aspects of the novel make you angry?
- Did you find Cadence a believable character? Could you imagine responding the way she did in similar situations? Could you imagine having a friendship with her?
- Do you think that the book would make a good film? Can you explain why or why not?
- What did you think of the ending? (Consider issues such as: was it surprising enough? Did it answer all the questions you had? If you like books to leave a little bit of mystery, did it leave enough mystery for you?)

IN SMALL GROUPS:

Drama Exercises:

Chapter Three:

Either rewrite Chapter Three as a play script, or ask the students to do this in pairs on their own. Ask them to take turns acting it out for the class.

Colloquial Language: p. 18 'throw a wobbly'

- In pairs, have the students mime out a scene where Cadence takes down the photo from the wall, and Liz discovers this and 'throws a wobbly'. Then ask them to swap roles. Ask them to choose who will play which role when they perform it for the whole class.
- If the students are boys, tell them to act out the scene as if it is happening between Josh and Ralph – imagining that Ralph has had an extremely difficult day on the farm, has lost several calves, and can't control his temper. Ask them how his reaction might still differ from Liz's, even at his most furious.
- Get the students to think up as many synonyms for 'throw a wobbly' as they can. Get them to describe what sort of environment they would feel comfortable using each of the phrases – to a friend, a parent, a sibling, a child much younger than themselves, a teacher, a headmaster, a police officer, a Maori elder?

End of Chapter Twenty Three:

TRIAL AND ERROR

EITHER divide the class into smaller groups which could accommodate the following numbers of roles, *OR* use this exercise for the entire class.

Before the students have read Chapter 24, elect a judge, a defence lawyer, a prosecution lawyer, and the members of a jury (numbers optional). Choose someone to play the part of Barney Abbott.

Give the **Prosecution Lawyer** the following information taken from the book (see p 116):

- Patrick O'Brien, the cook at a railway workers' camp, was caught in a mud slip where a railway tunnel was being dug out by several workers.
- When Patrick O'Brien was found after the accident he was still alive.
- His rescue train failed to get to help on time, because it was blocked by wagons on the line, and he died.
- The townsfolk of Burchfield still feel extremely upset about the accident of 1949, especially the surviving relatives of Patrick O'Brien's family. (NB: point out how old his children would be now; suggest that some might still live in the town.)
- If the station master Barney Abbott had raised the alarm in time, Patrick might have been saved.
- Barney Abbott knew there had been extremely bad weather and that there could be problems on the railway line as a result.
- The rescue train blew its whistle all the way down the track from the top of the Blunder.
- Barney Abbot would have known that the sound of the rescue train whistle meant that there was trouble and he should go to help.
- Other townsfolk did hear the whistle that night.
- Barney Abbott was found dead asleep with an opened brandy bottle beside him after the rescue train was delayed.
- Time was wasted shunting away wagons (which Barney Abbott had left on the line) so the emergency train could get through to help.
- Patrick O'Brien left behind a wife and six little children.
- Barney Abbott is still known as the town drunk.

Give the **Defence Lawyer** the following information taken from the book (see pp 111-115):

- Barney Abbott started work at 5:00 am.
- He usually finished work at 4:30 pm, but on the day that Patrick O'Brien died, he worked until 11 pm.
- He was worried about the problems that the very heavy rains might have been causing on the railway line – e.g. fallen trees across the tracks.
- He didn't take time to eat his evening meal.
- He spent five hours going up and down the railway line to make sure there were no obstacles on the track.
- Barney was swept away by the river at one point, and lost his boots as he tried to get back on shore.
- He found a weakness in the line at one point, and a tangle of young trees and broken branches at another point on the line. He started to clear them away with an axe, even though he was wet, cold, hungry and exhausted.
- He sent a telegram to Glenfurly telling the railway station there to delay the early morning train until the line had been checked again.
- He left two wagons blocking the line.
- He went to bed, utterly exhausted and perhaps unwell. He took a sip of brandy and then passed out.
- He failed to hear the whistle of the rescue train from the top of the Blunder.
- Barney Abbott now drinks heavily.

Give the person playing **Barney Abbott** all of the above information, as well as the points below (see pp 115-116):

- He believed very strongly in his duty and would often do tasks that nobody had asked him to do.
- He knew the railway line extremely well: eg after the storms, he was worried about the amount of water that would be rushing through the channels (culverts) that went under the track – he knew that if large trees fell into these and were swept through, they could damage the track above.
- Whenever the river is in flood, he feels guilty about the accident. He hears the ghostly train whistle and he starts drinking again.
- Nearly everyone in the town shuns him.

**Let the jury decide whether or not
Barney Abbott is guilty.**

DESIGN A COVER

If the class has recalcitrant boy readers, you may want to hand out the text in a plain, handmade dust jacket, and at the end of the novel, ask them to design a cover. Ask the group to vote for the best class cover. Then reveal the publisher's design. Ask the boys to discuss which cover they think is best, and why.

INDEPENDENT READING:

- Ask the students to re-read the description of Barney Abbott's yard on page 44. Ask them to write a description of all the wonderful junk *not* mentioned here, but which they might also find in Barney Abbott's yard. As a class, design a giant wall poster that illustrates as many of these ideas combined as possible. Students could each either draw, or bring in, a suitable item to fix to the poster. There could also be a spin-off here for a discussion of recycling: or, for more *advanced readers*, for a discussion of the relationship between 'junk' and history.
- Ask students to read from Chapter Twenty Four onwards on their own. Get them to write up their opinion of Barney's character as a result both of the above class courtroom exercise and their independent reading.

Extension or Research Activities:

- During work on the novel, samples of wild fuchsia, nettles, and ferns could be displayed in the classroom. Recordings and pictures of bellbirds and fantails could be used. Pictures of dairy farms might also be of help for some readers.
 - Research into the past of the school or its neighbourhood. Find photos of how the area was 50-100 years ago. Ask the class to compare what was there then with what is there now. How do such changes compare to those that Cadence notices in Burchfield? (pp 16-17.) Can they be related to a major historical shift like the closing of a railway?
 - Get pupils to interview a grandparent, or a local elderly person.
 - Organise a visit to a railway station, perhaps including a talk from railways staff. Afterwards, get the students to write a story about the start of an exciting train trip, incorporating some of the observations they have made of the station.
 - Organise a visit to a local library, for the students to look either at old newspaper collections, or other historical holdings the library might have.
 - Ask students to design a newspaper headline and to write a report of the tragedy at the Blunder (see page 85).
- Ask students to:**
- re-read the descriptions of the train on pp 26-27. Choose either a train or another form of transport, and write a description which compares it to an animal.
 - write a poem about a time they were really afraid.
 - imagine they are one of the men in the cab of the train (pp 92-98).
- EITHER*
- (a) write about how they feel working on a steam train (mentioning the heat, the hard physical work, the views they can see from the train, what the people they work with are like, the best and the worst parts of the job)
- OR*
- (b) write about an experience where a young person from the future seems to arrive in the train and tells them that steam trains aren't used any more in the era she/he comes from. What would the railway worker's reaction be?
- imagine they are trapped in a mudslide. Write about what it would feel like. What would their thoughts be? (p 100)
 - imagine that they are on the army rescue team that has come to dig to save someone from the mudslide. Get them to describe the effort they have to put in, what it's like to do this kind of hard physical work in bad weather, and how it feels to know that they don't have much time to save the person (pp 100-102)
 - Hunt through magazines or newspapers for a picture that matches the author's description of Cadence and/or of the farm and town setting that Diana Noonan has chosen for her novel. *EITHER* ask the students to write a character study of Cadence (include the way she feels about the setting) *OR* ask them to imagine that they are Cadence's cousin, Josh. Ask them to write down his opinion of Cadence.
 - Using photos of disused buildings as a starting point, ask students to write an imaginative piece about what the building was like once.
 - Relate page 82 to any map or contour work the students may be doing elsewhere on the syllabus.
 - Have the students who enjoy drawing create an expressive/illustrative map of how they imagine Burchfield must look like at the time of the action in the novel. (e.g. including railway line, small township/slips and partially visible bridge/swollen river/old station, etc.)
 - Is there a local railway? Ask the students to place it on a map of the area.