

# because we were the Travellers by Jack Lasenby

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## RESOURCE KIT for use in schools

Includes:

- a personal statement by author, Jack Lasenby
- chapter-by-chapter approach for classroom study
- comprehension questions
- issues for classroom discussion
- suggestions for activities and projects

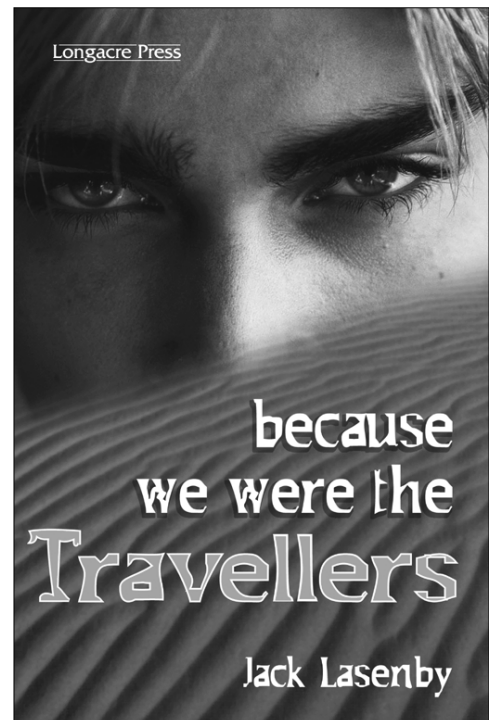
NEW ZEALAND IS A DESERT, its towns and cities reduced to rubble, even their names crumbling – Orklun, Hammertun, Teekawit, Lake Top. Scattered amongst the ruins are bands of primitive tribes: the Salt People, the Falcon People, the Travellers. Few can be trusted, much is to be feared. And when you're cast out of your tribe, like Ish, you're expected to die...

Here is an epic tale by New Zealand's great story-teller, Jack Lasenby, drawing on the ageless themes of rejection and survival, of cruelty and kindness, fear and love. A timeless and universal story.

*Because We Were The Travellers* sold out on publication in Australia. It is the first volume in a dramatic series in the vein of John Marsden's *War* quartet.

The award-winning 'Travellers Quartet' consists of:

- Volume One: *Because We Were the Travellers*
- Volume Two: *Taur*
- Volume Three: *The Shaman and the Droll*
- Volume Four: *Kalik*



*“Intense, vivid, poetic –  
a cruel and beautiful book.”*

John Marsden

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## Because We Were the Travellers

*Jack Lasenby*

PERSONAL COMMENT

**How did I write *Because We Were The Travellers*? These are some of the ideas I had in mind.**

I'm fascinated by our extremes of genius and stupidity. An epidemic species, we're using limited medical resources to increase fertility. We praise gentleness, practise violence. We are so anti-racist, the word race itself is disapproved, and we prefer the politically correct "ethnicism"; at the same time, we encourage Maori racism.

I don't believe there has to be survival value in everything we do. Too many species have vanished for me to believe ours has any guarantee of enduring. There are too many gaps in the fossil record. I think the creationists are loop-gutted; but Darwinism isn't entirely satisfactory. Sometimes I think we are absurd, sometimes noble. Most of the time I don't understand us.

I thought of the increasingly demonic monster we have made of the sun – through stupidity and greed – and wondered about surviving the change from our temperate climate to a desert. Most travel narrows people's minds, reinforces prejudices, makes travellers smug. Most travelling is mere self-indulgence in a world which can't afford it. But nomads travel because they'll die if they don't.

The nomads who interest me most are the traditional High Arctic Eskimos, but I thought of a boy born into a bunch of travellers like the nomads of the Bible: his mother's dead; his father dies; his sister is taken away from him. He's lame. He's left behind because he's a cripple. And I thought of how he might survive.

I thought of his relationships: with the animals, with the land itself and, most of all, with an old woman. I didn't develop the idea far, but thought about his developing sexuality, when the only other person around is an old woman. That's not

a nice idea to talk or write about, some would say, but awkward ideas persist, and it's a writer's job to be awkward. (Have you ever thought how politically incorrect Shakespeare is?)

I like people who have a reaction to their landscape. Many have little reaction to their surroundings. And there's another group who have a vendetta against a land or a city of beauty. How otherwise explain the awfulnesses we have built in New Zealand, the insults to our soil, water, and air?

That's something of what lies behind the book – for me. You may find other things in it. Somebody once said, "A book is a mirror. If an ass peers into it you can't expect a wise person to peer out." A good teacher once said, "You don't read the book; the book reads you." I'm somewhere in between, confused as usual. I enjoyed writing the book. I cried when Hagar died. I cried for Ish, too. Why he had to suffer quite so much, I don't understand, except that I know much of life is about suffering.

I've always had good friends yet know that life is about loneliness, too, so tried to learn how to live by myself. Ish's first drive, though, is to find a family, a territory, to settle as a farmer and gardener, to give up being a traveller. Perhaps the book began when I worked in the bush for long periods – on my own. Perhaps it began forty years ago when alone in a little tent in the middle of the Ureweras, I read *The Day of the Triffids*.

Those were some of the ideas in my mind when writing *Because We Were the Travellers*. There were enough left over for another couple of books as well.

## Chapters I-V (pp. 9-28)

### *Comprehension*

- What is Orklun?
- What is the significance of the Animals' Dance?
- Why do the Travellers wait until late afternoon to begin their Journey?
- What happens to Ish's father?
- Why is Ish left behind?

### *Discussion*

- What do you think has happened to New Zealand to make it a desert? What year do you think it is?
- Could a civilisation lose so much that we return to being primitive tribespeople?
- What do we know of the Travellers' culture so far?

### *Activities*

- Research similar tribal dance rituals and create the Animals' Dance as you think it would be performed by the Travellers.
- *Time Capsules*: Imagine that you are one of the last survivors of an environmental disaster. Write a letter to the future generations to remember your civilisation by and place it with things you consider representative of your time. OR divide into groups and each invent a society. Put together a time capsule to represent that culture and swap it with the other groups. What do they make of your selection?
- *Play 'Fallout Shelter'*: Break into groups of seven and draw a card each. The card will tell you what type of person you are (ie; male/female, age, occupation, fertility, special attributes). You only have room in the shelter for five people. Who are you going to cast out? Then get together with other groups and compare results. Challenge and ask questions of each other!
- "*Primitive people cannot afford to be kind. Survival of the fittest is the only possible code.*" Discuss, with reference to the Travellers, or stage a classroom debate.

## Chapters VI-IX (pp. 29-49)

### *Comprehension*

- Who makes the shout that slams against the hills and scares Ish?
- Why was Hagar left behind?
- What does Hagar tell Ish about how his father died?
- In the story Hagar tells, what do the old man and old woman do that is so cruel?
- What do Ish and Hagar find when they finally reach the Travellers' encampment?

### *Discussion*

- How much has Ish learned during his time alone?
- Should Hagar and Ish have tried to save the Travellers?
- What do you think is the meaning of the fable Hagar tells about the old man and woman?

### *Activities*

- Find out what you can about Eskimo myths and tales. Try to find the story Hagar tells. What is the relevance of these old tales to people's lives?
- Find an authentic old legend that you feel could be one of the Travellers'. Learn it and tell the story to the class.
- Ish draws events on the rock wall with charcoal (p.32). Research rock and cave art, then make your own version of Ish's picture.

## Chapters X-XII (pp. 50-69)

### *Comprehension*

- What is the name of the place of the Travellers' massacre?
- How does Ish catch a deer?
- What were the Travellers' ancestors, according to Hagar?
- What is the 'payment for a pup'?

### *Discussion*

- How do you feel about the description of Ish cutting up the deer carcass? Why do you think

the author placed so much emphasis on it?

- Why does Hagar laugh at things, and why does it irritate Ish?
- Would you know how to make arrows, or snares, or even fire, if abandoned like Ish?

### Activities

- *Language of Instruction:* Hagar is a good teacher. Look at how she instructs Ish to butcher the deer. Write down as precisely as you can instructions on how to complete a simple, practical task (eg; making scones, shearing a sheep, sewing a garment, or building a shelter from manuka).
- Ask an old person if they would teach you a specific skill they have. It could be darning a sock, fishing, tying rope-knots, plaiting flax, blowing an egg... etc. Write up how and what you learned and how you felt along the way.
- Ish worries that his bad temper and impatience will be his downfall. Is there an aspect of your personality that concerns you? Write about it, and any attempts you've made to overcome it.

## Chapters XIII-XV (pp. 70-88)

### Comprehension

- List all the things Hagar reminds Ish that he has learned.
- What adjective does Hagar use to describe the air at the Hawk Cliffs?
- Who are the people they will barter with at the Swapping Ground?
- What is the colour the Travellers can no longer dye their wool?

### Discussion

- Whereabouts in the country are Ish and Hagar? Look at a modern map and work out their route, then compare it with the map at the front of the book.
- Hagar tells Ish at the end of chapter XIV her version of the catastrophe that happened to New Zealand. What can you interpret from her story?

- Why do you think Ish is so excited about the idea of a hawk? How else is the hawk theme threaded into the story?

### Activities

- Draw, paint or illustrate in some way the Hawk Cliffs, perhaps incorporating them into a cover design for *Because We Were The Travellers*.
- Write up the scene when Hagar is attacked by wild dogs, from her point of view. What was she doing, thinking when it happened, and how did she feel when Ish saved her?
- Both Ish and Hagar love the Hawk Cliffs, and their life there. The author lets us in on this feeling by describing the environment in detail. Think of a place that means a lot to you, and write about it in a similar way, describing how it looks, feels and what happens there.

## Chapters XVI-XVIII (pp. 89-108)

### Comprehension

- Why does Ish call the hawk Dragon?
- What happened to Hagar's husband?
- What are the 'little shears' the Metal People leave for Hagar?
- What is drawn on the two sides of the disc the girl gives Ish?

### Discussion

- Hagar says that by taming animals we keep them immature. Do you agree?
- When Ish tells Hagar how he has trained the hawk, she comments that Ish has learnt much – about himself. What does she mean?
- What can you deduce about the Metal People's society? Why do you think they don't like to be seen?

### Activities

- Choose an animal or bird that you think would be useful to tame if you lived like Ish and Hagar. How would you tame and train it? What would you teach it to do?

- Choose a member of the class to be someone from the Metal People –maybe the man or the girl, or their leader. Ask them questions about their people, their culture and history.
- Make a video as if there were a hidden camera at the Swapping Ground. Film Hagar and Ish laying out their offerings and drawing what they want in return; then the Metal People appearing out of nowhere and their reaction to the goods. (Remember that they are surprised there are only two Travellers.) Then film Hagar and Ish discovering the metal tools and giving their thanks and gifts.

### Chapters XIX-XXI (pp. 109-130)

#### *Comprehension*

- What is the gully Hagar stops, cries and prays at?
- What is happening to the climate in the Whykatto?
- What saves Ish and Hagar from being killed by the Falcon People?
- What name has Rose given her baby?

#### *Discussion*

- What do you think of the Crone's Story? Does every culture have a creation myth? Why? What examples can you think of?
- Ish and Hagar now know about the Metal People, the Falcon People and the Salt People. What do we know about each group? How do you think they evolved?
- Should Ish and Hagar give up the Travelling life and settle at the Hawk Cliffs? Should they become part of the Metal People? Why/why not?

#### *Activities*

- Identify the main elements of a legend or myth. How is it different from a folk tale, for instance? Then write your own creation myth explaining the existence of a tribe of people.
- Authors draw your attention to some things rather than others. Jack Lasenby describes the

skinning and butchering of a deer in detail, for instance, but only mentions in passing (on p.109) the animals giving birth. Choose a scene from the story that you would like to know more about, and write it in more depth.

- Act out the scene where Ish and Hagar are captured by the Falcon People. How are you going to represent Dragon?
- Pretend that you are Rose. Write the story of your life since the Falcon People massacred the Travellers and stole you away.

### Chapters XXII-XXV (pp. 131-155)

#### *Comprehension*

- Who are Sim and Petra?
- What is the vegetable Ish has never tasted before until Dinny gives it to him?
- What is the image Ish uses to describe Hagar when she dies?
- Who does Ish bury Hagar with?
- What is Hagar's memorial?

#### *Discussion*

- Why is Hagar so adamant that Ish must leave her behind and continue the Journey?
- Should Ish have given Hagar the Dark Shrub? Why/why not?
- What does the future hold for Ish?

#### *Activities*

- Write the next chapter of *Because We Were The Travellers*.
- Illustrate all or part of Ish and Hagar's story as depicted in the cave art.
- Devise, write and act a scene from the future involving Ish and whoever you choose. Try and link it in with what you know of his character and past.

**Because We Were  
the Travellers**