

# BOX

PENELOPE TODD

*I sat outside the box and sorted through my backpack; emptied everything and put it back... I did that each morning and it helped me feel real...*

Derik is on the run. Not from the deadly epidemics on the rise in New Zealand but from the ruling government and its efforts to wipe out disease. The authorities have begun Endorsement: a nationwide drive to implant a device in every citizen, to regulate body chemistry and control emotions. It's a social experiment the whole world is watching.

But Derik wants to think – and feel – for himself. Trying to find shelter, stay hidden, and keep himself alive, he soon discovers he's not the only one to have turned fugitive.

*Box* tells a story of massive teenage rebellion against the denial of freedoms. In her latest, riveting novel, Penelope Todd creates a world that could just be days away from our own.



#### SPECIFICATIONS:

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#### RESOURCE KIT contains:

- Synopsis
- Author Inspiration
- Writing Style
- Editorial Comment
- Study Notes/Discussion Questions

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## Synopsis:

The date is some time in the very near future: as close as tomorrow. The New Zealand government starts two new social initiatives. The first is a plan to vaccinate the nation against killer viruses and to introduce ‘calibration’ at the same time: medication that will even out blood chemistry. Many citizens are concerned about the medication’s side effects. It seems to numb down the emotions. Intense feelings disappear; dreams vanish. In the other initiative, citizens who accept this ‘Endorsement’ are issued with Scope or identity cards – without which they can’t even buy food.

Derik Love, aged 15, rebels against these new measures to keep the population ‘healthy’. While his parents travel overseas to campaign against the government’s plans and check their legality, he goes on the run to escape Endorsement. While he is hiding out in the green belt that grows wild around his city, he discovers he’s not the only one appalled at the sweeping social changes. He hitches up with two others – Marti and Disco – and discovers some of the bittersweet delights of feeling all the emotions that Endorsement would medicate away. It’s not long before the trio of friends realise that there is in fact a mass rebellion from people their age: hundreds of high school kids have turned fugitive, and are trying to find shelter, food, and to organise a group protest to stall the government’s plans. They get involved – and are right there in the crowd when the impassioned energies of the teenage rebels come headlong in contact with the powers that be.

A novel about responsibility, individual freedom and the ethics of political control.



Clare Beynon

## Author Inspiration:

Once, while on a gooseberry hunt in the Makarora Valley, Penelope and her siblings slept the night on a large piece of cardboard. Remembering what that felt like gave her the idea that started *Box*, her sixth novel about teenagers.

Todd says, ‘The ongoing question in my novels is, how does an individual find or forge his or her own reason for being in a society that seems to desire conformity, safety and regulation? I wonder, too, how much trickier this quest is when we live increasingly alienated from the natural world.’

## Writing Style:

CHAPTER ONE pages 13–16

The first night after it all began we slept in a cardboard box. Marti said we would be warmer off the playground asphalt and she was right. I liked the way the sleeping bag slid on it when you moved, with a long papery ‘hishsh’. Your hair made a tiny crickly sound when you turned your head. I missed my pillow but smoothing my face along the cardboard put static in the fine hairs which felt interesting. When I lost myself in these little details everything else didn’t seem quite so menacing.

Beside me, Marti was so quiet I knew she must be awake. All evening we’d watched one other, wanting to trust but not daring to say much. She was the quietest girl I’d ever met. I tried not to think about the grubby bandage on her forearm and what might be under it.

I pointed my toes and arced them across the end of the box. Hishshshsh. I ran them along the cardboard ceiling until they were over my head. I tried for a scrunched-up shoulder stand but I got the wobbles and my legs crashed onto Marti.

‘Derik! I was just about asleep.’

‘Sorry. Yoga.’

[...]

‘What are you thinking about?’ Marti’s voice came out of the dark.

I deleted my parents, the morning sun on the lounge floor.

‘Nothing. Listening to the cardboard. Imagine a whole hillside covered with it, and you’re in your sleeping bag.’

‘Cool.’ But her voice was flat. ‘Actually, I can’t imagine playing ever again. Is it like this for grown-ups, d’you reckon?’



‘Maybe. But my parents took magnetic Scrabble to play on the way to Germany. They might be playing right now.’ Jotting notes, more likely, talking in tense voices, Dad swallowing chalk tablets for his stomach.

‘Flying? I’d rather be on the ground. Rather lie on paper than be way up there.’ Her voice trailed off as she realised it was my parents out there in the dark sky.

But cold air had sliced into my green cocoon. It wasn’t so much the flying, although that was dangerous enough these days with old planes being patched up, and threats of terrorism. But what if my parents got found out? What if a cardboard box was as good as it would ever get for me?

## Editorial Comment:

Penelope Todd's novel is thought-provoking, gently and often humorously told, and yet it also has a darkly sinister edge. In clean, accessible prose, and with a dramatist's eye for a tangible, realistic setting, the novel opens up urgent ethical and philosophical issues. In *Box*, Todd explores the ramifications of developments in pharmacology, and what has been called the 'medicalisation' or pathologising of normal human behaviour.

When discussing the scenarios that Derik, Marti, and Disco find themselves in, teachers can raise questions about the increasing use of antidepressants and anti-anxiety drugs in Western society; and the push for global immunisation against diseases that are constantly mutating. Can science keep up with the pace of new diseases? Should it try? What is the relationship between antibiotic medication, for example, and new strains of various illnesses? Can we ever truly escape the sadness, fear, jealousy and anger that Endorsement is supposed to eradicate? Should we want to? Do these shadow or negative emotions teach us anything? Are they necessary for our personal growth? This novel provokes questions that range over the scientific, the ethical, the psychological and personal. Delicately told, it is rich with complex ideas, and it pulls the reader along with its touches of mystery, adventure, and even thriller, as its young protagonists pit themselves against the strongest authority in the land.

## Study Notes/Discussion Questions:

*by Penelope Todd*

- How much choice should individuals have when society is in danger e.g. during an epidemic or war?
- How safe/private is internet communication? Some say it is as 'safe' as sending a postcard. Do you agree or disagree?
- What are the pressures on Derik? What helps him decide what to do?
- Discuss the empty box story.
- Discuss Marti's comment that our bodies might be our maps.
- Make up codes for names and addresses and memorise half a dozen.
- Make a plan for a hut and work out what essentials you'd need for a two-day stay. What would you do if it rained?
- What changes have occurred in your lifetime – in medical care, the way we use money, the way people communicate, domestic arrangements? And in the last century? Ask a gran or grandad to visit and talk about changes they've seen.
- Talking of change, how far is too far?
- How much control do people have of their own destinies? How much does the government have? (Or school/society/family/social groups?)