

# TEACHER'S RESOURCE KIT

*Longacre Press Junior Historical Fiction*

## *Dead Dan's* PHYLLIS JOHNSTON *Dee*

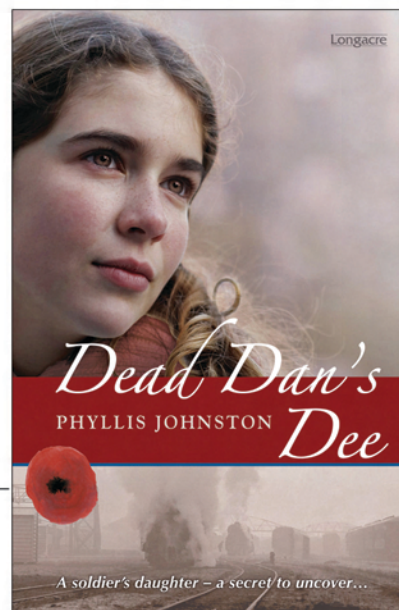
***A soldier's daughter – a secret to uncover...***

*'Dee thrilled every time she thought of herself as Dead Dan's Dee. She was proud to be the daughter of a brave soldier father who died fighting in the war.'*

After the Great War, Dee lives at the beach along with her mother and aunt. It's a paradise for Dee, with the sun, the sea and the sky, but little by little her seaside haven disintegrates. Her mother and aunt become very ill, leaving Dee abandoned...

However, soldier Joe has never forgotten his promise to his army mate, Dan, Dee's dead father. He and Essie take Dee north into half-broken bush country. Roaming the countryside, doing farm work, and making friends, Dee is almost happy again, but shadows hang over her life in Mamaku. Joe and Essie can't afford high school for her, and all the kids seem to know something Dee doesn't — something about her soldier father Dan.

Told with subtlety and charm, this is a poignant, big-hearted story — of honour, courage and the aftermath of war.



### SPECIFICATIONS:

Imprint: Longacre Press

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Readership: 11+ years

### RESOURCE KIT CONTAINS:

*Information about the author; questions for character study; questions for language study; topics for historical study; topics for creative response*

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## About the Author:

**Phyllis Johnston** has been writing for thirty-six years. In 1998 she was awarded the Betty Gilderdale Award for distinguished service to New Zealand children's literature. Recently she moved from Tauranga to Hamilton to be near her family. She enjoys reading, walking, painting abstracts, gardening and having visitors.

*Dead Dan's Dee* is her tenth work for children and young adults.

## From the Author:

As I was born in 1935, I often heard the First World War discussed by my parents and relatives. My father was in camp in 1918 when Armistice came and my uncle served in France, as did my Dad's cousins. While growing up we heard hundreds of anecdotes about the war, and often when unhappiness occurred in marriages between ex-soldiers and their wives, my parents would blame it all on the war.

Many of the returned soldiers did not speak of their horrific memories of life in the trenches nor of battle. This naturally had an impact on their wives and families. Two of my older brothers (one 17 years and the other 19 years older than me) served in the Second World War, so you could say my childhood and adult years were sharply affected by war.

Recalling this later, I could see the effect war had, not only on the returned soldiers who struggled with the horrors of war, but on women and children as well. This led me to imagine what it would be like to be a child of such a marriage, and *Dead Dan's Dee* gradually fell into place. I wanted to explore how society treated children during the 1920s, and the fact that there were no antibiotics pre-World War Two. I used the setting of Mamaku, near Rotorua for the story. It's a mill town I lived in when 11 years old, a town that made a lasting impression on me.

Thus was *Dead Dan's Dee* created.



## Before Reading:

- What does the cover picture reveal about the story?
- When and where might the story be set?
- Who is the main character?
- What do you know about life in New Zealand in the period following the First World War?

## Comprehension Questions

### Chapter 1

- What is the proficiency exam? (p. 9)
- How did Dee get her names? (p. 10)
- How did she feel about her father? (p. 10)
- Who are the 'wicked Hun' and the 'hordes of Boche'? (p. 11)
- What is Hilda's philosophy of life? (pp 13, 14)
- Why is the Martin family wary of them? (p. 15)
- What does Dee know of her father?
- What year is the story set? Clues on page 17.

- Why did the doctor come? (p. 18). What did he mean by 'living in an ivory tower'? (p. 19)

#### Chapter 2

- What kind of women are Hilda and Melva? (pp 21, 22). Why are they resistant to the hospital system? (p. 23)
- Why is Mr Hansen interested in Hilda and Melva? (p. 25)
- What does Hilda think of the Hansens?
- What is a 'haemorrhage'? (pp 28, 29). Why is it so serious?
- What 'terrible thing' was happening? (p. 32)
- Why did things have to be burned and fumigated? (p. 34)

#### Chapter 3

- How has Dee's life changed forever?
- What is the form she is signing? (p. 39). Why don't they tell Dee the truth?
- What has happened to Dee? (p. 40)
- Did Hilda and Melva have any choice about leaving Dee?
- What kind of person is Bessie?
- What is The Refuge? How does it compare with Dee's home by the sea?
- What does she mean by a 'posh voice'? (p. 48)

#### Chapter 4

- Why is creative art not allowed? (p. 52)
- What is 'Bohemianism'? (see also page 69).
- What is an 'orphanage croc'? (p. 55)
- 'We're all a bloody show'. What does this mean? (p. 55)
- What's a Homie? (p. 62)
- Why is Dee looking for signs?
- Why would they open her mail? (p. 63)

- Why is Bessie a plebian? (pp 13, 66)

#### Chapter 5

- Why does Matron want to limit Dee's education? (p. 70)
- 'You're the ringer of Dan'. What does Joe mean? (p. 75)
- Who has legal rights over Dee?
- What does Dee come to understand about Bessie's behaviour? (p. 81)

#### Chapter 6

- How is Dee treated on arrival? (pp 84, 85)
- What's wrong with Essie's mum?
- Why does Joe shake? (p. 87)
- What does Dee learn about her father? (p. 87)
- How does each character react to the bush? (p. 93)

#### Chapter 7

- What is revealed in Hilda's letter? (p. 100)
- What is Joe and Essie's financial situation? (p. 101)
- What was running 'in full clobber'? (p. 106)
- What does 'barmy' mean? (p. 111)

#### Chapter 8

- What kind of person is Irene?
- What does 'escape the reality of war' mean? (p. 117)
- Why might Joe be so touchy? (p. 117)
- What evidence is there that Dee's father was mentally ill?
- What might Mr Swanson have to do with the plot?

#### Chapter 9

- What is 'the pledge'? (p. 129)

- What problems does Irene face? (pp 132-134)

#### Chapter 10

- What does 'conscripted' mean? (p. 146)
- Why were people so reluctant to tell Dee the truth?
- Why was Dee so angry about the ANZAC service? (p. 153)
- Why did she feel that she should move out? (p. 153)
- What might 'the other' be? (p. 156)

### Exploring Language:

#### 1. Similes:

- There is some highly descriptive language for characters. Choose one of these and sketch a portrait of the person's face:
- 'His toothless mouth puckered like a prune.' (p. 30)
- Matron 'puffs up like a pouter pigeon.' (p. 56)
- Lines on his face 'like a spider web'. (p. 61)
- Mother 'as grim as a gargoyle'. (p. 88)
- 'Thinking felt like black ink spilling out.' (p. 42)

#### 2. NZ sayings and colloquial language:

- Joe uses a lot of colourful, informal language. Define these words: pommy, sheilas, Tommy rot, struth, elbow grease, upski, bonza, skedaddle, monthlies.
- What do the following sayings mean?
- 'Idle hands are for Satan's work'. (p. 47)
- 'The black hole of Calcutta'. (p. 49)
- To give a 'Chinese burn'. (p. 69)
- 'Beggars can't be choosers.' (p. 85)

### Character Study: Dee

- How was Dee different to other children her age? (p. 7)
- How does Dee's attitude change by the end of chapter 1? (p. 20)
- What are her concerns and worries? (p. 37)
- Why does she initially feel betrayed by the adults in her life?
- Why is she sometimes treated like a child?
- What effect would the death of both parents have on a 13-year-old?
- What is Dee's reaction to death? (p. 74)
- Why did the place at Mamaku make Dee feel free? (p. 97)
- Dee has a powerful need to know the whole truth. Find incidents in the story that illustrate this (eg. page 162).
- How has Dee changed and developed by the end of the novel?
- What has she learned about the adult world – especially the way adults communicate? Why do adults use 'cryptic' language with children? (p.160)
- Think of five adjectives that describe Dee's personality.
- Summarize Dee's character in a single sentence.

### History:

#### 1. New Zealand Society

- What was daily life like in those days? Describe the cooking, heating, bedrooms, toilet, health care, transport? Is Dee rich or poor?
- What is junket? (p. 45) What is 'beef dripping'? (p. 53). Make a list of foods consumed in the story.
- What was the school leaving age in the 1920s? (p. 104)

- Did girls normally go on to higher education?
- What were the likely career options for girls? (p. 47)
- Do you think NZ society has improved for girls today? How?
- Compare Dee's schools with the classes of today (eg. page 110). List similarities and/or differences in education.
- Is a child's education limited by money today? (p. 108)
- 'Married women keep the home' (p. 121) was the common social belief. Do you agree? Debate this statement.
- Find Mamaku on a map.

## 2. Tuberculosis

- What is a 'notifiable disease'? (p. 18)
- What is tuberculosis? (p. 53)
- What is a sanatorium?
- How did they treat sickness in those days? (p. 8)
- How did Hilda and Melva plan to 'heal themselves'?
- Is there a connection between the mind and body-health? (pp 13, 14)
- Research: Find out about the spread of tuberculosis in New Zealand after the First World War. Is it still a problem today?

## 3. First World War

- World War One killed more New Zealand men than any other war we have been involved in. What long term effects did this have on the country?
- Why was it called 'the Great War to end all wars'? (p. 12)
- 'The futility and madness of the Great War' is described (p. 11). Why was WWI a futile war? Find out what started the war, and the end results.

- What effects did the war have on returning soldiers (physical and emotional)? (p. 134)
- Gallipoli was 'a heroic but disastrous campaign'? Why? (p. 140)
- Why is it still important to mark ANZAC day?
- Soldiers are referred to as 'heroic, conchies, or cowards' (p. 141). Define each word. Why were most soldiers regarded as heroes?
- What is so potent about the word 'coward'? (p. 144)
- Were soldiers forced to fight?
- Why were deserters executed? (p. 150)
- Why was every soldier trained to be an 'executioner'? (p. 164)
- There is a theme of 'death' in the novel. Give examples of incidents that relate to death (eg. pp. 137, 140, 153).
- Read *Letters From the Coffin Trenches* by Ken Catran

## Creative Responses:

### 1. Art:

- The natural world is used in much of the imagery. Choose one of the following descriptions, and paint a picture of the image:
  - 'Blue veins as delicate as leaf veins.' (p. 21)
  - Tree, 'like a huge dead fish'. (p. 23)
  - 'Sultanas tasting of sunshine'. (p. 25 )
  - Seagull 'crying like a dead soul'. (p. 30 )
  - 'Trapped, like a fly in treacle.' (p. 45 )
- Draw the abandoned house in the bush. (p. 94)
- Charlie Chaplin movies were popular after the 'Great War'. Why? Watch a short Chaplin movie, then design a poster for the movie.

## 2. Poetry:

- The shooting of the cows (Ramona and Myrtle) is a powerful symbol of the horror of war. War poet Wilfred Owen wrote of soldiers 'who die as cattle'. Read some of his war poems. Write your own poem about war or death.
- Read the poem *Hiawatha* (p. 9), and a poem by Tennyson or Byron (p. 13).

## 3. Letter Writing:

- Imagine you have been ordered to fight in a war. Write a letter expressing your feelings or objections to fighting.
- Imagine you are 'trapped' in an oppressive orphanage. Write a letter to a relative or friend, describing the conditions.

