

R E S O U R C E K I T

I AM NOT ESTHER

by Fleur Beale

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*“The women of our faith all have
Biblical names. We have given you
the name Esther.”*

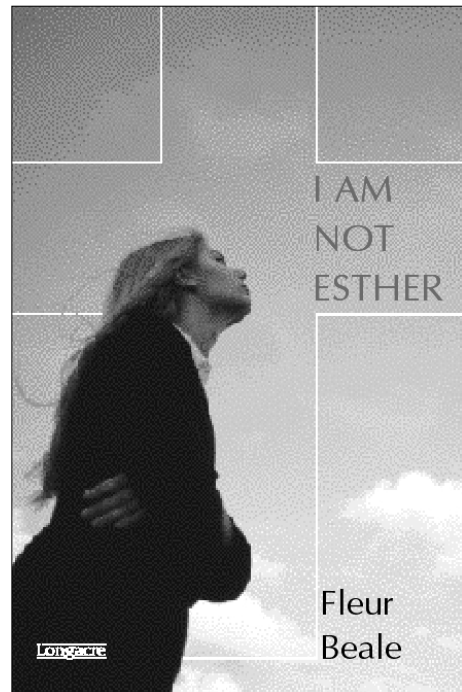
Something’s wrong with Kirby’s mother. She’s decided to go to Africa to work with refugees, and leave Kirby behind with relatives. Except that Kirby never knew she had relatives – especially not these ones. Uncle Caleb and Aunt Naomi belong to a closed religious sect. Kirby’s new name is Esther, and she must wear a long blue skirt, white blouse and plait her hair modestly. There are no mirrors, television, radio or papers in this house – and Uncle Caleb rules.

Will Kirby, or Esther, survive? And where is her mother really?

Here is every teenager’s nightmare, a gripping psychological thriller set in New Zealand. Kirby’s experience of life in a fundamentalist cult is drawn in careful and convincing detail, building to a powerful battle over identity.

AUTHOR

Fleur Beale is a Hamilton-based writer and teacher who is well known for her radio stories as well as a host of teenage novels, many of which are taught in schools – including *Rockman*, *Slide the Corner*, *Driving a Bargain* and *Fifteen and Screaming*.



RESOURCE KIT for use in schools

Includes:

- **chapter by chapter approach for classroom study**
- **comprehension questions**
- **issues for classroom discussion**
- **suggestions for activities and projects**
- **TV talk show game**

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Chapters 1-2 (pp.7-44)

Comprehension

1. What triggers her mother into telling Kirby that they're moving to Wellington after Christmas?
2. Where is Ellen really going?
3. What is the name of the sect Uncle Caleb and his family belong to?
4. How does Uncle Caleb deal with Kirby/Esther's disobedience?
5. Why is Magdalene worried that Esther is going to die?

Discussion

Why do you think Kirby just goes along with her mother's actions? What do we know about their relationship? What images and perceptions do you have about religious communities? Where do those ideas come from? How would you act in Kirby's situation at the Pilgrim house?

Chapters 3-4 (pp.45-65)

Comprehension

1. What is Kirby looking for in Uncle Caleb's study?
2. Who discovers her there?
3. Why do the family drive so many different cars?
4. What game do Rebecca and Rachel play at the shop?
5. What happens to disrupt the family picnic by the lake?

Discussion

What do you think is the 'great experiment' referred to in the letters Kirby finds in Uncle Caleb's study?

How much do we know now of Miriam's story?

On p.63 Kirby says it was 'always the men who controlled what the women could do'. Do you agree? What other examples back up your view?

Chapters 5-6 (pp.66-103)

Comprehension

1. What event will take place when Kirby/Esther turns sixteen, according to Charity and Damaris?
2. Why do some members think it's a good idea for the community to move to Nelson?
3. Why doesn't Daniel want to marry Damaris?
4. How does Esther/Kirby save Aunt Naomi?
5. What is the new baby called?

Discussion

Both Kirby's mother and Mrs Fletcher say 'You can't love anyone when you can't love yourself.' What do they mean?

What is Daniel's role in the family, and how does this affect his decision? Is Kirby right when she says (p.78) it will be worse for him than for her?

Damaris says she likes to keep the Rule – it makes her feel safe in the love of the Lord. Is Kirby arrogant to think she is right and Damaris and Charity are wrong?

Chapters 7-8 (pp.104-133)

Comprehension

1. What sound wakes Kirby in the middle of the night when there is a crisis at the hospital?
2. What does Mrs Fletcher tell Kirby about her mother?
3. Why has Uncle Caleb been stood down from the Council of Elders?
4. What happens when Daniel refuses to marry Damaris?
5. What does Kirby decide to do with her 'Esther' clothes?

Discussion

At the end of chapter 7 Kirby/Esther says a prayer for Zillah. Is that significant? Why?

Why do the Council of Elders disapprove of state (and university) education? Should they be allowed to move to Nelson and set up their own school?

Chapters 9-10 (pp.134-159)

Comprehension

1. Who is Rory Ashton?
2. Who do Kirby and Daniel go and live with?
3. Where does Kirby find her mother?
4. Why does Kirby make herself so incredibly busy?
5. How does she see The Children of the Faith one last time?

Discussion

Is Kirby right in thinking Louisa and Gemma couldn't understand what she had been through? Why?

Is Daniel right in saying that Kirby should not see Maggie again – that it would 'split her loyalties'?

Why is Kirby so afraid of being honest with the psychologist and her mother about her feelings?

ACTIVITIES

When Ellen leaves so suddenly, Kirby is in shock. Write about a time when somebody's words, actions or an event left you 'winded and breathless and sick.'

Learn a psalm off by heart and recite it to the rest of the class. How did you learn it? How do you feel about the psalm? Is it an effective punishment?

Write about the scene at the lake from Miriam's point of view. Think about her voice at the time – would she speak like Daniel and the others, or more like Kirby?

Design, illustrate or paint something that you think Miriam might make to express her feelings about the scene at the lake, or her experience in general.

What is it really like to look different out in public? Try wearing an unusual form of dress and go somewhere as a group. Note how people respond to you, and your own reactions – individually and as a group. Then write up your findings and present them to the class.

Pick a volunteer to be Damaris, and place her in front of the class. Interview her about religion, life, her role and her expectations. How convincing is she? What questions were the hardest to answer, and why?

Kirby increasingly notices some of the good things about The Children of the Faith. Pretend you are a content member of the sect, and write about your life, religion, and why you like it.

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

Look at the passage on p.51 in italics (the letter to Caleb from the Fellowship). Look at pp.122-128 (the Meet). Consider the type of language members of the sect use compared with the language Kirby uses. Then choose one of the following:

a) List as many specific differences as you can identify between the two styles, including their choice of words and the way they make up sentences. Comment on what effect these have on communication, and why their own style of language is important to people.

or

b) Write a letter to Caleb Pilgrim from Ezra Faithful on behalf of the Fellowship, regarding the actions of Daniel and Esther at the Meet, and informing him as to why he is no longer an Elder of The Children of the Faith. Try to incorporate as many examples of the style of language members of the Fellowship use as you can.

STAND UP AND TALK!

Getting up and being able to speak confidently in front of others is an extremely useful skill throughout life. So here are some *three-minute* talk topics for the class. The challenge? Talk for *three minutes* about one of the following issues or questions from *I Am Not Esther*.

1. Tell the class why you don't agree with the views of The Children of the Faith.
2. Tell the class why you do agree with the views of The Children of the Faith.
3. Tell the class who your favourite character is in the book – and why.
4. Tell the class who your least favourite character is in the book – and why.
5. Deliver a three minute book review of *I Am Not Esther*.

6. In just three minutes describe what you think is going to happen to each member of the Pilgrim family in the future.
7. Tell the class why Daniel did the right thing in leaving his family.
8. Tell the class why Daniel did the wrong thing in leaving his family.
9. The climax and the turning point in a novel aren't necessarily the same thing. In three minutes tell the class what was the turning point, and what was the climax of *I Am Not Esther*.
10. In just three minutes tell the class why you like, or don't like, *I Am Not Esther*. Try to back up your view with examples from the text.

TV TALK SHOW

Objective: Questioning and articulation skills; understanding of issues

What to do:

Place three chairs in front of the class. The person in the middle is the television interview show host. The two others are on the programme and are going to be interviewed.

The talk show host has five minutes to interview the two guests, and after that another interviewer and two guests are chosen.

The aim for the guests is to put themselves imaginatively inside the head of their character and answer questions as accurately and clearly as they can. They must respond to the interviewer and other guest as they think their character would.

The aim for the talk show host is to encourage vibrant, in-depth discussion between the guests about things of interest to the audience.

Note:

The host and guests must first decide on the *context* of the interview, which the host will then use as a lead-in to the audience – e.g: “A baby girl has just died in the remote Nelson religious community because its’ father instructed the family to pray rather than go to hospital. Just what do The Children of the Faith believe? Tonight we have two people who know the sect from the inside – Ezra Faithful, its leader, and Daniel Pilgrim, a young man who left the community in order to pursue a career as a doctor ...”

The rest of the class must respond as a television audience and note down who and what works best, and why.

What makes a good interviewer/interviewee?

What makes a good question/answer?

What are the ingredients of a successful interview?

In each round of five minutes, the two guests are (choose one):

Daniel and Ezra Faithful

Caleb Pilgrim and Miriam

Mrs Fletcher and Ezra Faithful

Kirby and Ellen

Kirby and Miriam

Rory Ashton and Ellen

Damaris and Daniel

Kirby and Esther (yes, you read right – be imaginative!)