

# Red Cliff

BERNARD BECKETT

197 x 130mm, 144pp, paperback  
ISBN: 1 877135 42 9 rrp \$14.95

**T**here is a new feeling now when I wake in the morning. A feeling I am moving forward. I can tell I am growing stronger, and it's not just physical.

Soon, when people think of Carissa, the most popular girl at Stanway, they will think of me too. Samuel and Carissa. Nothing can ruin it. Not the stupid new house, not the designer valley that surrounds it. If I am patient, if I work to a plan, this will be my year.

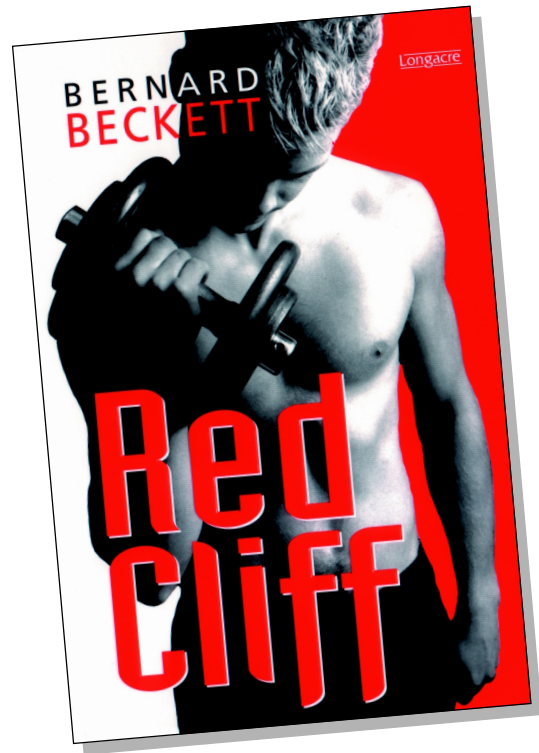
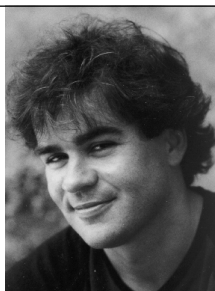
**B**ut plans have a way of falling over, and other people have a bad habit of getting in the way.

People like Kurt, with his made-to-order smile, or Leon, bigger than any teenager has a right to be. People like Carissa, who has her own nightmare to live.

Then there's Samuel himself, and all the trouble he attracts. He'll need to be even stronger than he imagines.

This is some year. Whether or not it's Samuel's won't be decided until the very end.

BERNARD BECKETT is a teacher at Onslow College in Wellington. His first book *Lester* was published to great acclaim in 1999.



## RESOURCE KIT for use in schools

Includes:

- Introduction
- Author's comment
- The *Because* Game
  - Plot analysis
- Writing activities & exercise
  - Alternative beginning
- Discussion & Comprehension
  - Scripting & Performance
    - Essay topics
    - Visual responses

Resource kit ISBN: 1 877135 47 X  
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*Red Cliff* is published by

**Longacre Press**

PO Box 5340, Dunedin, tel: 03 477 2911,  
fax: 03 477 7222 Email: longacre.press@clear.net.nz

Distributed by **Random House NZ Ltd**,  
PB 102950, North Shore Mail Centre, Auckland,  
Tel: 09 444 7197, Fax: 09 444 7524  
Email: customerservice@randomhouse.co.nz

## Introduction

Here are a few ideas I've developed for using *Red Cliff* as a class text. I think of the skills which a text study can develop in five broad areas, these being:

- a) The development of language skills through reading and writing. Students become better able to make the language work for them.
- b) The gaining of an understanding of the construction of a novel through a close study of text. Students become able to comment sensibly about the characteristics of a particular piece of work.
- c) The development of creative skills through imaginative tasks which lead on from the study. Students gain the confidence necessary to develop their own ideas and make their own mistakes.

- d) The deepening of an understanding of the world we live in through consideration of the issues the novel raises. Students learn to discuss and explore their own values.
- e) The increase in social skills through interactive activities. Students are able to work with each other, present and comment upon each other's work.

I've tried to keep these skills in mind when developing this kit. The following table shows how the activities provided slot into the five skill areas and may be useful as you develop your own units of work around this text. Of course I hope all of the above skills will be considered secondary to the more important aim of giving students a chance to take pleasure in reading. To this end I hope there's some fun to be had in the following activities.

*Bernard Beckett*

### Contents and skill breakdown

ACTIVITY	Language	Construction	Creativity	Values	Socialising
Author's Notes		✓			
Because Game			✓		✓
Text Analysis		✓			✓
Writing	✓		✓		
Alternative beginning	✓	✓			
Experience writing	✓		✓		✓
Voice activity	✓		✓		
Discussion				✓	✓
Comprehension	✓				
Scripting	✓		✓		✓
Performance					✓
Essay topics	✓	✓		✓	
Visual responses			✓		✓

## Author's comment

Writing for me is a leisure activity, something I do for fun and relaxation. It means I tend to write fairly loosely. I am prone to going off on ridiculous and unworkable tangents for my own entertainment and then have to work hard to prune it back later. I suppose it's fair to say I don't take the job all that seriously. I have a short attention span and as soon as writing stops being fun and starts feeling like work I'll stop doing it.

I remember well where I was when I wrote the first page of *Red Cliff*'s first draft; sitting in the sun at Mistletoe Bay in the Marlborough Sounds in the middle of a two week mountain-biking and kayaking summer holiday. Indeed a week later the first thirty pages were almost destroyed when torrential rain made a mockery of my waterproofing skills as we were biking over the Takaka Hill. That night we had to peel the pages apart and leave them to dry in the campground's boiler room.

Not that you'd recognise those pages now. My original idea was to write a book about revenge. The setup was to have Samuel standing in the aisle of the bus looking at the four backseaters who he absolutely loathes after years of being ignored by them and their type. So he decides to seek revenge and begins investigating their lives. The idea was for all four of the so-called 'perfect' kids to have their own dark secret that made them vulnerable. One for instance had a survivalist sect living in her basement, another was having an affair with one of the others' fathers and so forth. (Like I say, my first drafts are always rather loose.) The story was going to end with the sect taking the school bus hostage and Samuel becoming a hero and saving the day.

The story you now have before you is, I hope, somewhat more refined. The storyline is simpler but the key concerns I started out with remain. That is, the notions of the outsider trying to break in, of revenge, of an attempt to grow strong and finally of Samuel drawing strength from the realisation that he's not the only screwed up person in the world. Other people are just a little better at hiding it. I think that is a liberating thing to discover and is why the story takes place in a modern subdivision, where the appearance of success and normality is so highly valued. Anyway, I hope this tale appeals to the odd child inside of you!

## The Because Game

I'd like to be able to say this idea is my own but that would be a big fat lie. I picked this up working in improvisation and it remains one of the most effective tools I know for creating and analysing storylines. I usually spend a full lesson on introducing the game, which in itself is loads of fun and can unleash a heap of creativity, and from there dive into two or three hours of text analysis and/or a similar amount of time on the students' own writing projects.

### The game:

Students pair up and link arms. They are given an opening sentence which is the single point from which all else is going to flow – e.g:

'The tent began to leak.'

One of the two students must now think of a direct and immediate consequence of the tent leaking and express it thus:

'Because the tent began to leak, I was woken at three o'clock in the morning.'

Both students, still linked, must act this rude awakening out while the line is spoken. Now the second student must look for the next consequence – e.g:

'Because I was awoken at three o'clock in the morning I heard faint music above the rain.'

Again this is acted out by the pair while the first student is thinking, 'Okay, I'm awake, it's raining, I can hear music. Now what? Maybe,

'Because I heard faint music above the rain I put on my coat and went to investigate.'

Again each line is physically acted out. This makes it more fun and the movement picks up the energy and helps them concentrate. Note that each statement begins with *because*, then the previous statement and then the direct consequence. Emphasize to the students it is alright to take small and uninspired steps – eg; 'because I went out to explore I got wet feet.' Improvisers say 'dare to be dull', it's infinitely preferable to the 'because I went out to explore I saw a huge spaceship in the field' variety. The more the events feel like the natural and inevitable result of what has gone before, the stronger and more credible the story becomes.

Maybe use two students in front of the class to demonstrate the concept, then get the class to pair up and try one of the following starters:

- The alarm didn't go off
- The canteen ran out of pies
- The \$10 was missing
- The book we were made to read in class was boring
- The shopping trolley had a wobbly wheel

Now sit back and watch as they all follow their unique story paths. In the noise and mayhem they will feel unwatched which should help students free up. The more they can be encouraged to physically act out what they're saying the better.

After a couple of minutes stop everyone and get them to report back to the group where their *because* lines took them. They won't all have uncovered brilliant stories at this stage but they will all have gone off in quite different directions. This is worth highlighting I think – the huge number of possibilities growing out of a single and seemingly innocuous starter. Stories are everywhere and creating them isn't as mysterious as it might seem. A simple rule like 'because' can help unlock a lot of creativity.

Now for the bad news. Some of these stories will obviously be crap. Get some initial suggestions from the class on what might kill a story. Why didn't some of these stories work?

Change partners and repeat with a new starter. Again get students to report back at the end. Start to build up a consensus on which stories are excellent. Do this three or four times. Keep the analysis light at this stage so as not to destroy the flow or enthusiasm.

At the end of the fourth round you can all sit down for some more in-depth analysis. Maybe focus on:

- Links which aren't logical. Saying 'because' when in fact there's no good reason why one event would lead to another. This is where a story tends to lose credibility and is often why we find a novel, play or film 'unbelievable'.
- Links which are too manipulative. We can feel the creator directing the story for their own purposes, eg; the kid who comes up with 'because it was a hot day the building caught fire' because they're desperate to include a fire engine and a rooftop rescue. In these situations we are reminded of the presence of the author and the story loses some of its magic.

- Too many links which are so flat we are left with the feeling that nothing really happens. At some stage there must be a little bit of surprise or inspiration.

A heap of other ideas will flow from this exercise and of course much will depend on your own focus and the ability of the class. I would certainly highlight the key issues of credibility and surprise. It has been said that a good story is one where the final ending seems to have been the only possible outcome and yet still the reader doesn't see it coming. This combination of inevitability and surprise can be very satisfying indeed.

Finish the lesson by giving a few of the class performers a chance to run through a *because* with the whole class watching. Get the class to provide the starting sentences.

## *Because follow up/ Plot analysis*

Although you'll soon see that this can be used as an individual exercise I suggest running it as a group activity, over two or three lessons, as follows:

Put the students into groups of three and get them to identify a list of 'because starter events' in *Red Cliff*. These are events which are not explained within the story but come as established facts which are then used to get plotlines rolling.

e.g: 'Samuel tried to burn down his old school'

This is external to the story. Nothing in the book led to it, but a number of events flow from it. You can also use pre-existing emotional states.

e.g: 'Carissa is ashamed of her family'

Once the groups have identified three or four plotlines each get them up on the board. This will give groups more options to pick and choose from and also might clarify things for students who haven't quite clicked on to the concept. Now get each group to choose four of these starters and develop a *because* line for each. Put this example on the board so they can see what they're aiming at:

Because Carissa is ashamed of her family she doesn't let people into her house.

Because she doesn't let people into her house she makes Samuel conduct his interview outside.

## Because – a writing activity

Because she makes Samuel conduct his interview outside he becomes curious.

Because he becomes curious he visits Carissa's mother.

Because he visits Carissa's mother Carissa is furious etc etc.

You can make a bit of a challenge out of it if you like. Who can find the longest *because* line? Is there one that runs from the beginning of the book to the end?

Once students have done this get them to present their longest *because* line as a wall chart and include page references for each key point. The idea is first, to encourage a close reading of the text, and second, to develop a better understanding of the idea of plot construction.

### Extra follow up

A number of questions for teaching/discussion can lead from this exercise, again depending upon your group and your own focus. Some possibilities:

Which events are key to getting the story going and which are more window dressing? (i.e: could be removed without destroying the basic story) e.g: The uncle bringing the bodybuilding book is a key event. We know this because a very long *because* line can be built from it.

Look at the differences between the main plot and subplots. How many subplots can the students identify?

Using knowledge from the Because Game critically evaluate *Red Cliff's* plot structure. Where are the links weakest? Where is the author obviously working too hard to keep the storyline moving? Which links are least logical?

How much space is given to the various characters and their own stories? In particular, would the story be stronger or weaker if more time was devoted to developing Carissa's story? (Personally I think it would be stronger.)

A theme of *Red Cliff* is taking control. To some extent at least Samuel learns to make decisions and shape events. Using a major plotline, identify which 'because' are the result of Samuel making a conscious decision and which are just events happening to him. To what extent has Samuel shaped his own destiny?

Creative writing drills are always awkward. Approaches which attempt to provide 'how-to-write' templates can easily feel bogus whereas at the other extreme 'write 500 words on your favourite pet, you have forty minutes' is a bit unfair on those who need a bit of guidance (not to mention those without a pet). There are three writing exercises in this kit and while they all lean towards the 'favourite pet' end of the spectrum I've tried to provide some sort of support structure in each case.

You can build upon the Because Game to give students practice at controlling the pace of their writing. I find a lot of students, when developing stories, will oscillate wildly between excruciating detail with no momentum and wild splurges of action where the entire story unfolds in a single sentence. ('Then we noticed the boat was sinking, we jumped into the water, battled through four metre waves, got mauled by a shark and discovered the hidden treasure washed up on the shore. The end.') Sometimes this is due to the student getting bored with the story and trying to finish it in a hurry but I also think there's a real art to evenly paced storytelling. An art which needs to be developed.

Provide the students with the following three starters:

The television broke

I was hungry

The car wasn't where I'd left it

Get them to write ten *because* sentences for any one of these. Once they're happy with these get them to write a story of between 250 and 300 words which includes the ten events. This will force the over-describers to economise and the plot fiends to flesh things out a bit. It will also bypass the 'I don't know what to write' inertia and let the students concentrate on the skill being practised; evenly paced storytelling.

For students who need more challenge add in constraints eg; stipulate that the story must end in a supermarket. Get them to write down ten characteristics of the main character and see if they can drop them into the story unobtrusively. Ban the use of the words *then*, *so* and *because* at the beginning of sentences.

## Alternative beginning

This is how the first page of the first draft of *Red Cliff* looked. It might be interesting for students to read this and compare it with the first page as it was published. What are the comparative strengths and weaknesses? Which themes were already apparent? Which most makes you want to read on? Why?

The bus was never late. Other kids, city kids, got to make their excuses. Car wouldn't start, train delayed, bike got a flat tyre, but if you were a valley kid nobody would believe you. You got to endure every painful minute of every first spell. You even got there twenty minutes early.

The bus wasn't new, in fact it was an ancient, smoke farting, gear crunching beast fit only for teenagers and other second class citizens. The driver, Mr Malcolm the Design teacher, was also well past his best. He often lost his way during lessons, or lost track of time, but never when driving that bus.

That was the only thing about being a valley kid. Life was full of certainty. Quiet, grinding-you-down certainty. Samuel stood in the middle of the aisle, as he always did, holding the back of a seat to keep his balance. People around him pushed and jostled as the bus picked up speed, preparing for the twisting climb out of the valley. At sixteen Samuel was too old to be a stander. Third formers stood, by the fourth all but the most ugly and awkward had graduated to a seat near the front. During the fifth and sixth forms they would work their way back at a pace determined by their social standing. The very lucky would make it as far back as the waiting room, the two side facing seats only one step away from every valley kid's aim, close enough to smell them, or even be included in a conversation. One step away from the back seat.

Not Samuel. No one had ever saved him a seat, or called out for him to come and stand by them. He doubted any of them even knew his name, despite being on that bus for three years. He was just 'zombie' to them, he heard them whisper it when he walked past sometimes. Samuel looked to the back seat, the four chosen ones stretched out in comfort while the rest of them suffered the squashed stale air. Leon. Big, captain of the first fifteen, Leon. Bigger than anyone he'd ever seen close up. Carissa, with the perfect skin, who every boy in school saw inside his head when he closed his eyes. Angela, who was the centre of everything that ever happened around the school, and Kurt. Good looking, rich kid

Kurt who had paid his way in, despite only being a sixth former. The four people everyone wanted to be with, everyone wanted to be. Not Samuel. Samuel looked at them and he saw everything he hated, everything that was to blame for the way his life had become. But now Samuel was tired of it. Now Samuel was ready for a change. This year, he had promised himself, he was going to make them pay. Every last one of them.

## Writing exercise – Detailed descriptions

This exercise is an attempt to give students a chance to write in detail about something they know. Often our inability to describe things is not due so much to a lack of language ability as it is to an unfamiliarity with the thing we are trying to describe. It is the old adage, 'write what you know'. If you know something well enough the metaphors, the details, the adjectives will come. So, in keeping with the *Red Cliff* themes, I suggest setting up an activity where students experience and then describe physical pain! (Yes, has a certain appeal doesn't it?) It works something like this:

Get the students to pair up. Their task is to each devise for the other an activity which will involve pushing some aspect of their physical endurance to its limit. The task must be able to be completed in less than two minutes and must use readily available equipment. More importantly it must be an activity the other partner will agree to submit themselves to, as they have absolute right of veto. Some examples for people who are not comfortable with extreme physical activities would be sitting against a wall with your thighs horizontal for as long as possible, holding a light classroom chair straight armed out in front of you, or holding your breath. Just so long as there is an experience of pushing past a barrier where your body wants to give in.

To really make this work, the person in the pair who devises the activity then takes on a drill sergeant role; that is, they get to cajole, encourage and abuse in an attempt to force the participant to go the distance. Of course the roles are then reversed so everybody gets to experience each side. As a risk management strategy you're probably going to want to check on the activities the pair have agreed upon

before sending them off. Remind students that they should concentrate upon the sensations they experience – psychological and physical – as they approach their limits.

Once they have completed their tasks they are asked to write 200 words on the experience. Get them to concentrate entirely on the feelings, not wasting words describing the mechanics of the activity. Where was the pain? What did it feel like? What were you thinking? What did you hear? What did you long to do? What about after it finished? Describe the relief etc. You may wish to get them to consider the tone they are using in advance e.g: masochistic, humorous, tortured.

Once they have finished get the students to read their piece to one other person in the class. Between them they have to find two things they really liked about each other's work. Get the students to circulate and repeat this three or four times. At the end get students to volunteer to read a piece they really liked (but not their own) to the class. Always give the student whose work it is the right to refuse if they wish.

Finish by getting suggestions from the students as to why certain pieces of writing worked particularly well. This is an important habit for them to get in to. Analyse, analyse, analyse...

### Writing activity – Voice

A huge part of the success of a novel, particularly when writing for teenagers, rests with the voice that is achieved. If the voice is inconsistent, unbelievable or – worst of all – sounds like an old person trying to sound young, the work can quickly become unreadable.

*Red Cliff* uses a combination of diary entry and limited third person through the eyes of Samuel and Carissa. Whether you like this book will have a lot to do with how successful you think these voices have been. One way to get students thinking about this is to get them to have a go at writing for a particular voice themselves.

Have the students choose an incident from the book involving either Leon, Kurt or Carissa which is currently told from Samuel's point of view. Have them re-tell the event as that character's diary entry – e.g: a diary entry from Kurt describing the day Samuel was beaten up. Because we all tend towards

our own style when writing get students to first think about the sort of voice that might suit the character and then exaggerate it. So if they decide to make the character paranoid, vain, awkward, let that drive the writing.

Again it's nice to have them analyse their own work at the end. Maybe a pyramid type structure could work for this. Students pair off and read each other their work. They then decide which of the two pieces is best (if they can't decide then they can use both). They then pair up with another couple and the two best pieces are read again. The four in the group decide which of these two is best. The four find another four, the two best pieces are read again, a winner is chosen and so on until eventually the whole class has chosen its favourite piece. (Of course the numbers won't work exactly, sometimes groups have to merge, be formed from three pairs etc.) Once the best piece has been agreed upon try to get the students to express what it was in particular they liked about this piece of descriptive writing.

### Discussion

Class discussions; never seem to get going when you want them to, always rewarding when they do take off. Here's one structure which might help, drawing on issues raised in *Red Cliff*.

Split the class into threes. Give each a photocopied continuum, a line reaching across the page from 'Couldn't disagree more' through to 'Absolutely'. Now give them the following four statements:

It's okay for a boy to buy his girlfriend gifts in the hope that this will make her more likely to have sex with him.

It's okay to use 'faggot' as a term of abuse.

Physically fit people are more attractive.

In this world we make our own luck.

Counselling is a waste of time.

The group must place each statement somewhere on their continuum. They don't all have to agree, but they must be able to explain why that position has finally been chosen. Give them plenty of time here. Some of the best discussion will take place at this point, where they don't think they are being watched. Students who would never share their

views with the whole class might contribute at this stage. Better still, opinions which students may feel are unacceptable are most likely to be aired here.

Next up, choose a statement and get each group to come up and mark their position on the continuum on the board. If the groups are in general agreement move on. If the class opinion is strongly split, ask individuals to justify their group's position. From here spontaneous discussion might just break out, you never know.

## Comprehension

Just a few comprehension questions to check the little dears have actually read the text, or at least rented the video (I wish). Some of these are deliberately straightforward, others slightly more taxing.

1. How many people in Samuel's immediate family? Name them.
2. What does Carissa's father do for a living?
3. Approximately how much can Leon benchpress?
4. Where did Carissa get her camera from?
5. Describe the physical appearance of Samuel's father.
6. List any four items in the psychologist's office.
7. Where did Samuel's family live before they moved to Red Cliff?
8. Name two sports Carissa plays.
9. Who hosts the parties up the river?
10. Name the piece of furniture Samuel's family brought with them from the old house.
11. List any three things we know about Kurt's father.

## Scripting and Performance

I always enjoy getting students to take a piece of prose and turn it into a script for performance. It's a good way to get them to read a piece more closely, it stretches a specific writing skill (dialogue) and it lends itself to group work and performance. It could be fun for students to come up with a short script for the first time Samuel meets with his psychologist. There are plenty of clues in the text

as to how this might have gone and what might have been discussed. Students will also have fun lampooning all the counselling cliches.

As a follow on activity, or indeed instead of this, you may wish to have students act out the script provided below, from a party where two lads are trying unsuccessfully to chat up Carissa. I would do this in groups of four, with three actors and one director. Before asking them to prepare the piece I'd read it through as a class and ask the groups to consider how they'd like to play it. In particular, how intense is the competition between the boys? Are they just having a lark or is it life and death? How knowing is Carissa? Is she playing them for her own amusement or is she a bit naïve about their intentions? Where should the audience sympathies lie? Is this piece funnier if the audience despises these boys or if it quite likes them? How will the physical positioning of the characters affect the impact of this piece? In my experience students will treat exercises like this as seriously as you do. That is, if you're prepared to give it two or three lessons, force them to learn their lines off by heart, support the directors etc, you'll generally get some really nice work out of them.

Boy 1 Hi ya.  
Carissa Hi.  
Boy 1 Drinking?  
Carissa No thanks.  
Boy 1 Might not either then. Ah, Clive.  
Carissa Carissa.  
Boy 1 Yeah, I know.  
Boy 2 Hi. Mind if I sit here?  
Boy 1 Yes.  
Boy 2 Wasn't asking you.  
Carissa If you like.  
Boy 2 Drinking?  
Boy 1 She'd rather not.  
Boy 2 Right. Ah, Mark.  
Carissa Carissa.  
Boy 2 Yeah, I know.  
Boy 1 So, ah, what you doing for your holidays?  
Carissa Dunno really.  
Boy 2 What would you like to do, if you could do anything?  
Carissa Um, sailing maybe. Bay of Islands.  
That'd be good.  
Boy 1 My uncle's got a yacht.  
Boy 2 No he hasn't.  
Boy 1 You don't even know my uncle.

Boy 2 Know you're a liar though.  
 Boy 1 She didn't.  
 Carissa Or maybe go surfing. I've always thought surfing looked like fun.  
 Boy 2 Ever tried?  
 Carissa No.  
 Boy 1 I could teach you. What say we go tomorrow afternoon?  
 Boy 2 Hey, that's not fair.  
 Boy 1 What?  
 Boy 2 It was my line. The holiday line was my line. You can't get the credit for it.  
 Boy 1 I was here first.  
 Carissa You could come too, if you wanted. That would be alright wouldn't it?  
 Boy 1 Nah, there wouldn't be room in the car.  
 Boy 2 Your car's huge.  
 Boy 1 Not with the boards.  
 Boy 2 Where are you going?  
 Boy 1 Dunno. Somewhere we'd have to drive.  
 Carissa So your turn. What's your idea of a perfect holiday?  
 Boy 2 Not sure. Yeah, yachting would be good.  
 Boy 1 Since when? You can't even spell yacht.  
 Boy 2 And you can't spell desperate. Hasn't stopped you dribbling has it?  
 Carissa Ah, I've changed my mind. I think I will have that drink after all.  
 Boy 1 & Boy 2 I'll get it!

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## Essay topics

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Wouldn't be quite right not to include a few of these would it? Just a few suggestions.

'For a book set at the start of the century *Red Cliff* is curiously old-fashioned. Little boy works to become strong, rides to the rescue of the damsel in distress, wins her heart.' Is this a fair summary?

'*Red Cliff* provides more than the title. In this novel the setting is crucial. Without the valley there would be no story.' Do you agree?

'The most important events in *Red Cliff* happen offstage.' Which major events occur out of sight in this novel? How important are they?

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## Visual responses

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Create Samuel's training chart, showing the exercises and weights he was doing at the beginning and his progress through to the end. Illustrate at the appropriate points of the chart other events that were occurring in the story.

Create a map or model of *Red Cliff*, incorporating as many setting details from the novel as you can. Mark where you think each event from the story took place.

Create a character collage. Find images that represent to you characters from the book, such as Samuel, Leon, Carissa, Kurt, as well as Red Cliff – after all, it's almost a character in itself.

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