

# Teacher's Resource Kit

# RED LEADER DOWN

## KEN CATRAN

When 17-year-old Matt dreams that he is a World War 2 pilot in a dogfight against the Germans, something strange happens. Was it a dream? Because later that morning, the family gets news that Grandad died at exactly that time, 3.15 a.m.

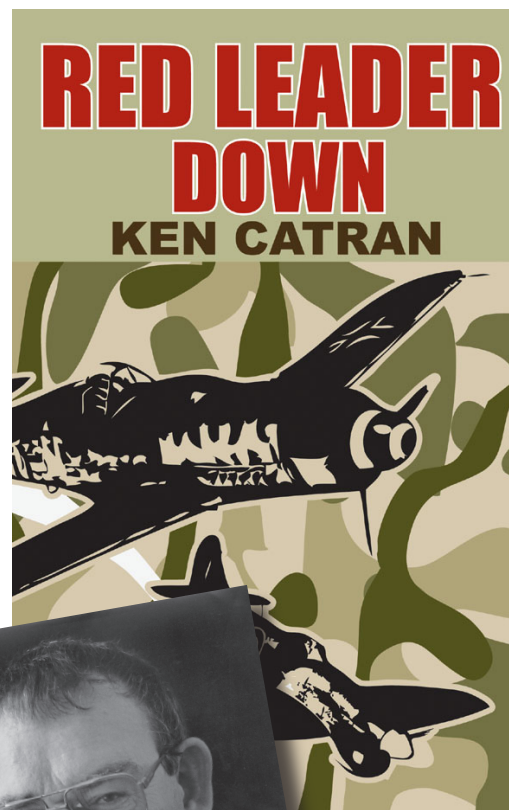
This is the beginning of a bewildering set of adventures into which Matt is plunged. At Grandad's funeral, two of his old squadron mates turn up and Matt becomes aware that there is a cloud over Grandad's name, something that happened in the last days of the war, to do with the death of his Squadron Leader, Jingo Brook.

After the funeral, Grandad's house is trashed. With the help of a local 'bad boy' Matt discovers who did it and what was taken – his grandad's log books and journal from WW 2.

The second part of the novel is Grandad's story, told in the first person, when he was a little older than Matt. He joins a Tempest ground-attack fighter squadron, operating in Germany, in the last months of the war.

In the third part, Matt, financed by his grandad's estate, goes to Europe and, on the banks of a northern Holland canal, finds the evidence that clears his grandfather's name. The skies above are blue and quiet but he has won his Grandad's last victory.

**Ken Catran** is an award-winning writer of novels for young adults. His recent novels *Letters From the Coffin Trenches* and *Lin and the Red Stranger* were both finalists in the New Zealand Post Children's Book Awards, and *Lin and the Red Stranger* was shortlisted for the 2003 LIANZA Esther Glen Medal. He is a prolific writer for young readers and a popular speaker in schools and at literary festivals.



Including classroom activities for students, age 13+, in the following areas:

- \* Language Study
- \* War
- \* Heroism
- \* Flying
- \* Character Analysis
- \* History



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Private Bag 102950, North Shore Mail Centre, Auckland,  
tel: 09 444 7197, fax: 09 444 7524  
Email: [customerservice@randomhouse.co.nz](mailto:customerservice@randomhouse.co.nz)

# PRE-READING

\* From the cover picture and title, discuss the possible setting, time period and plot elements.

\* Read the first page only: what pictures does the action bring to mind? Where might you have seen planes fighting like this?

# PLOT POINTS

\* What is the importance of the dream sequence in chapter one? How does it set the plot in motion?

\* Who are the old men on page 22?

\* The 'punch in the stomach' (p.24) signals the mystery that the plot hinges on. What is the scandal? (p.60) Explain what Matt must now do to solve it.

\* Does it seem likely that Gus shot Jingo?

\* Which pilot seems the most unstable?

\* The arrival of the German ace (p.162-164) is a turning point for Jingo. Why? Why does he disobey orders (p.164)?

# LANGUAGE STUDY

\* Define these wartime words from the first chapters:

Jerry, dogfight, Ace, tracer, G-force, glycol, prop-fighter, shrapnel, perspex.

\* What did this combat jargon mean?:  
copped it (p.18), gong happy (p.18), blooded (p.55), a dose of slanting music (p.149), blood-tub (p.149).

\* Euphemism: 'Walked' (p.81) is a euphemism for death. Find some other euphemisms for dying.

\* Explore Catran's writing style using page 31. List

the different verbs or adjectives he uses to convey action. Which are most effective?

\* Read a chapter of a Biggles book (by W.E. Johns). Compare the written style of war stories for young people in the 1950s with current young adult literature.

\* Why does Catran use the device of a dream to tell Grandad's story to Matt?

# THEMES

## WAR

\* 'Whatever war shapes, war also destroys' (p.72). Discuss how this theme shapes the entire novel. What emotional damage does war do to soldiers? How does it affect them in later life? (p.182-3)

\* What realities of war are often not shown in war movies/news reports? (p.88). Why does the media or government often hide the horrors from the public?

\* War movies 'make violence look exciting' (p.49). How do movies do this? View war movies (old and new) and judge the accuracy of the war scenes. Example: *Dark Blue*

*World, Saving Private Ryan, The Battle of Britain.*

\* Design a poster for a movie version of *Red Leader Down*.

\* What are the hidden scars of war? (p.156)

\* Debate the topic: Sometimes war is justified.

\* Imagine you have been ordered to fight in a war. Write a letter expressing your feelings about or objections to fighting.

\* Read Catran's war novel *Neo's War* (1995).

## HEROISM

- \* Define the word 'hero'.
- \* Why were soldiers given medals in the war?
- \* What is moral fibre? (p.120) Was it fair to label pilots with L.M.F. in war time? (p.120-152) Why did it shame them so much?
- \* Do you think Jan's action is heroic or suicidal? (p.131)
- \* Jingo 'thought more about war than consequence.' List the evidence that proves Jingo's heroism was misguided. (e.g. p.146)
- \* Research and read an excerpt from *The Song of Roland*. (This 12th century hero became friends with his enemy after a duel.)
- \* What is 'honourable' about combat according to Gus? (p.168) Do you agree that fighting can be acceptable sometimes?

## FLYING

- \* Catran includes a lot of technical information about war planes and weaponry. Choose one of these planes and draw a labelled diagram: Focke-Wulf, Tempest, Heinkel, Junkers, Mistral, Mustang, Lancaster, Dornier.
- \* On pages 51-55, Gus describes the 'awful emotion' of his first flight. Chart his feelings on an 'emotion graph'.
- \* Read his poem on page 71. Write a poem that reflects the intensity of his experience as a pilot.
- \* Dogfights are the main action in the story (e.g. p.54, 79, 168-9). Use paint and dye to create a skyscape with duelling fighters.
- \* Research the flying aces The Red Baron and Sir Douglas Bader. Why were they considered heroic?
- \* Design an icon for the nose of a fighter (p.106).

# CHARACTER ANALYSIS

## GRANDAD GUS

- \* What do you learn about Grandad from chapter one?
- \* He is described as a 'snappy old bugger' (p.21). What evidence is there of this?
- \* How does he feel about his family? (p.16)
- \* What motivated at first to fight him in the war? (p.18) Was it simple revenge?
- \* What does 'touch the face of God' (p.68) mean to Gus?
- \* What effect did killing people eventually have on Gus? (p.117)
- \* Read his poem on page 124. What dark feelings are expressed here?

- \* Sketch an old soldier's face.

## JINGO

- \* Describe Jingo's personality based on pages 35-37.
- \* 'Whatever war shapes, war also destroys.' (p.72) How does this happen in Jingo's life?
- \* What was he addicted to/obsessed with? (p.144, 173, 177-8).
- \* Was Jingo seeking death? (p.91) He wanted to be like the lords in *The Song of Roland* (p.94). What appealed to Jingo about heroic combat?
- \* Research the meaning of the words 'jingo' and 'jingoism'. How well does this fit the character?

## MATT

\* What is happening in Matt's mind in chapter 1? Is this a message from Grandad, a time slip, or just a dream?

\* In chapter three Matt confronts the old men and the local toughs. What does this reveal about his personality?

\* Why does he feel close to Gus?

\* What has healed inside him by the end? (p.205)

## LINUS

\* How did Linus deal with racist behaviour towards him?

\* Why was he treated badly in the US after the war?

# HISTORY

\* What were the main causes of the Second World War?

\* Find a photo of London in 1944. Describe the living conditions.

\* What was the effect of the war on German civilians? (p.109-110)

\* Was there anything wrong with bombing German towns and cities? (p.95-96) Research the devastating bombing of Dresden in 1945.

\* What was happening to Hitler's army during 1945? (p.115, 161)

\* What are some of the deadly secret weapons that both sides developed?

\* Why was the bridge at Remagen so important? (p.125)

\* How does Catran humanise the 'enemy'? (e.g. p.90)

\* Write a short story about a young soldier in a present-day war zone.

