

TEACHER'S RESOURCE KIT

A RESPECTABLE GIRL

BY FLEUR BEALE

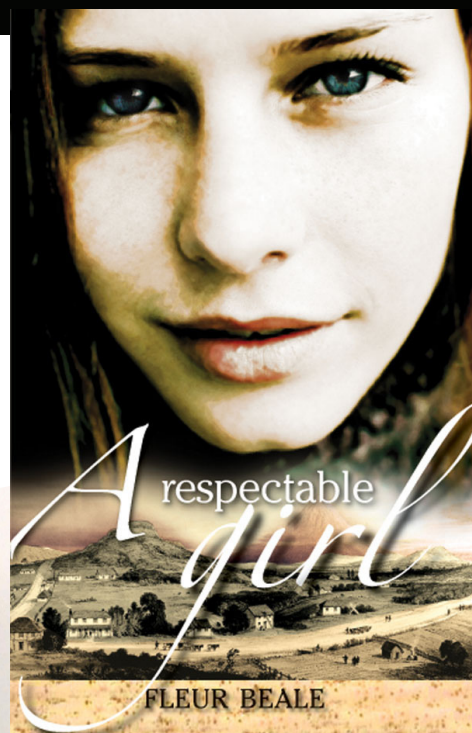
Set against a backdrop of colonialism and civil war, *A Respectable Girl* by Fleur Beale is a young adult historical romance novel set in both New Zealand and England during the 19th century.

The main character is Hannah, a strong Elizabeth Bennett-like personality, who lives in Taranaki with her father, twin brother, Maori step-mother and step-brother during the time of the land wars. Hannah and her twin, Jamie, travel to England, for a number of reasons – one of which is to find the family of their dead mother. There they encounter the culture shock of upper-class English county behaviour. In Hannah's search for her own identity and for the truth about the mother she has never known, she needs all her stubborn independence to survive.

There are many fascinating aspects to the book: the Pakeha/Maori racial clash of the time; a young teenager's growing knowledge of the world around her – romance, marriage, work, the purpose of life, racism, death; the striking differences between the freedom of New Zealand and the constraints of England.

A Respectable Girl is rich, full of detail, suspenseful, strong on character, has an excellent sense of place and it retains its secret until the final pages.

Fleur Beale has written 27 books for children and young adults, and has won many awards. She was born in Inglewood, Taranaki where some of her forebears settled when they emigrated from England in the nineteenth century. This book begins in New Plymouth in 1859. She did much of the research for it from Oxford in England where she lived for a year. She found it a surreal experience to be sitting in the Bodleian Library in the 21st century reading via the internet, the newspapers from New Plymouth of that era.



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

- * War
- * Land
- * Colonialism
- * Respectability
- * Morality
- * Relationships
- * Famous people



A Respectable Girl is published by Random House New Zealand Ltd,
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READER'S NOTES

PLOT

The plot structure is like a quest. Hannah must unravel the secrets of her background, while also undergoing the trials of becoming adult.

* The opening introduces the quest: 'One word can change things' (p.5). Why is the word 'spoiled' so shocking? Why does it 'crack open the landscape' of Hannah's mind? See pages 56–58.

* What is the mystery of her father (p.47)? How does Hannah begin to solve this? See page 64.

* What is the plot twist revealed in the letter? See pages 80, 97–98.

* Drama: Pages 200–204 are a dramatic highpoint in the plot. What are the revelations and confrontations? Act out this scene as an exaggerated melodrama.

* What is an heir (p.244)? How is Jamie almost tricked? See pages 250–251.

* What is the surprise in Chapter 27?

* Does Hannah find what she is looking for by the end?

* Storyboard a plot for a movie version of the novel. What visual scenes and dramatic highpoints could be best used.

What locations would be needed?

HISTORICAL SETTING

The novel is set against a backdrop of colonialism and civil war.

1.LAND

What was the state of Maori–European relations?

How did disputes about land ownership begin? See pages 43, 139–143.

Research the years following the treaty and form an opinion on land ownership.

2.WAR

What sparked the war? See page 172.

What tactics did the Maori use? (Chapter 18).

How did it affect the family?

3.HEALTH

List conditions for childbirth in the 1850s alongside the technology/support of today's maternity care (Chapter 3).

What kind of sex education was there? See pages 37–39.

4.ENGLAND

How did London differ from Taranaki in 1860? Find photographs of both settings and compare transport, housing etc.

Describe the class divisions that Hannah witnessed (Chapter 25).

5.COLONIALISM

What were the 'colonial manners' that Aunt Frances despised?

What kind of people were attracted to settle in New Zealand?

Discuss: Where did the kiwi 'do-it-yourself' attitude come from? See pages 268–269.

6.MORALITY

What behaviour did Victorian morality dictate about these issues: illegitimate children (pages 124–125), casual sex (Chapter 28), war. Write a letter to a Victorian newspaper that either attacks or supports the morals of the day.

THEMES

1. RESPECTABILITY

The social concept of respectability guides most of the characters. It is shown through dress, behaviour, morality and class structure.

* What behaviour was expected of a respectable girl? See pages 37, 41, 118, 124, 279–80.

* Define these words: ‘ladylike’, ‘genteel’, ‘polite’, ‘unbecoming’.

* Write a list of the qualities of a respectable girl (use the character of Adelaide as a model). Draw a portrait of a very genteel lady.

* How important was clothing? See page 262.

* ‘Never go beyond the line of what is pleasing,’ says Lady Derrington (p. 278). What was beyond this line for a woman? Discuss.

* Debate topics:

Girls don’t have to be respectable today.

Some behaviours are still unacceptable for girls.

2. RELATIONSHIPS

The novel is about relationships between men and women. It ranges from traditional roles to romantic attachments.

* Hannah sees marriage as ‘a dangerous business’ (p.15). Why is she so resistant to the idea? See pages 100, 104–106.

* What models of marriage has she seen? E.g. the Walters

* Why didn’t Hannah want to be a ‘good wife’ (p.108)?

* Discuss: Are women still dependent on men?

* What attracted Lindhurst to Hannah? P. 100

* Write a love letter in the style of the time (from a male or female).

* ‘All men took mistresses’ (p.273). What kind of men?

What qualities do these men share? Hendon, Derrington, Rathbone.

Write a dramatic monologue as one of these men and present it.

* Who are the positive male role models in the story?

* Compare the courtship rituals of that time (coming-out dances, chaperones) to present-day ‘dating’ habits.

Write an essay for or against the use of courtship rituals.

* What are the signs of love that Hannah experiences (p.287)?

FAMOUS PEOPLE

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

In her feminist book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she says women are raised to be ‘soft, obedient and pleasing to men’. How accurate was she? Does the novel portray this kind of woman? Is this still true at all? Why was Hannah impressed by Wollstonecraft (p.108)? Read her book and find another quote that supports the novel.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE (p.335)

How did she contribute to the independence of women?

WIREMU KINGI TE RANGITAKE (p.141)

Research the role he played in the Land Wars.

CHARACTERS

HANNAH

- * What is revealed about her personality and skills in the first chapter?
- * She ‘relished the cut and thrust of an argument’. What does this mean?
- * Find an incident to match each of these words that describe Hannah:
Resourceful (Chapter 3)
Determined (Chapter 8)
Independent (Chapter 19)
Redoubtable (Chapter 22)
- * Is she respectable?
- * ‘Life is a river’ (p.184) — what does this mean to Hannah?
- * Given her negative experiences with men, why does she fall for Rathbone; and why does she accept Lindhurst’s proposal of marriage (p.347)?

JAMIE

Summarise Jamie’s personality from the incidents in Chapters 12 and 22. Why is he so appealing?

OTHER ACTIVITIES

WORD STUDY

- * Use the story to work out the meaning of these old fashioned words: gold-digger (p.246), Jezebel (pp.245, 251, 315), redoubtable (p.329), genteel (p.36).
- * Retell the story of Jezebel in a modern setting.

