

Teacher's Resource Kit

SINGLE FIN

Aaron Topp

Jamie Finland is a 19-year-old who has turned his back on his mum in Masterton and headed north to the eastern Bay of Plenty. When local 'soul' surfer Mike Taylor saves his life one day, a strong friendship is formed. Fin lives on the thought of surfing that next wave and partying hard with his best mate and new life mentor.

But Mike is killed and Jamie is left alone.

After the accident, Fin is 'adopted' by Mike's Uncle Bobby, who runs a large farming operation down the coast. Fin is starting to get used to his new life when Mike's younger cousin, Jack, freshly expelled from boarding school, arrives on the farm to learn a work ethic. Jack is the complete opposite to Mike and this causes friction with Fin. Then Jack discovers surfing and Fin is pressured into fighting the demons he thought he had shut away for good.

The story traces Fin's journey from hitting rock bottom to making his way back to the surface. It has a deep surfing theme, based on NZ's own culture and huge surf industry.

Aaron Topp is in his early thirties and lives in Hawke's Bay with his wife and toddler son. He has taught at Ohope Beach Primary and since 1999 has worked in the rural family business. He has been an avid surfer since he was 14.

Single Fin is based on a true story. Several years ago Aaron's best friend and surfing mentor was killed on the way to the beach.



This resource kit contains classroom activities for students aged 13+, and includes the following topics:

- Comprehension
- Thematic Analysis
- Language Exploration
- Character Study



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Comprehension Questions:

- What is the meaning of a 'double-edged sword' here? (p. 17)
- Why is Peter Jackson mentioned? (p. 20)
- Define the word nemesis. (p. 21)
- What comments reveal Fin's obsession with surfing? (p. 24)
- Who is the character Huey? (pp. 34, 35, 38, 40, 46, 48, 134)
- What movie is famous for the quote about napalm? (p. 35) How does it relate to surfing?
- What geographic features make The Mouth dangerous? (p. 37)
- Turei (pp. 53-55) is the villain. Predict what part he will play in the plot.
- How does Mrs Higgins start Fin's healing process?
- What is the land issue? (pp. 60-61) What saves the land? (p. 200)
- How does Fin first react to Jess? (p. 91)
- What is the 'knot' that unravels on the beach trip? (p. 114)
- Why has Fin given up surfing? What changes him? (p. 124)
- Why is the quote from Ed Hilary used here? (p. 133)
- What is a grommet? (p. 133)
- Define the terms 'base fitness', 'anaerobic', and 'aerobic fitness'. (pp. 141 and 154)
- Why doesn't Fin do competitions? (p. 143).
- Why is Mike an 'easy excuse' for Fin? (p. 144)
- What benefits of exercise does Fin eventually discover?
- Research the source of the Red Sea reference. (p. 193)

Deeper Thinking:

- What 'special bond' do you think Fin and Mike shared?
- Was Fin's mum right to hide the truth from Fin? (pp. 21-22)
- Why do you think Fin wants to impress Mike? (p. 44)
- What is Einstein's Theory of Relativity? (p. 46) Recall a similar experience when time has apparently slowed down (or sped up) for you.
- Why didn't Mike approve of Grace?
- Explain the 'scar that has no reflection' (p. 70)
- Why is Fin suspicious of the car accident? (p. 82)
- What is a 'cultureless upbringing'? (p. 82) Do you think this is possible?
- What does the term 'good karma' mean to you? (p. 118) Why doesn't Fin believe it now?

- Read the night scene on pages 128-132. Is this a dream, a ghost or a vision? Imagine yourself in a similar camping situation. Write a one-page scene with a surprise ending.
- Why does Fin think there's no such thing as an 'intention-free woman'? (p. 160) What does he suspect?
- How is each character given a happy ending? Do you think this is realistic?
- Is this a realistic novel overall? Discuss. What situations had a ring of truth (resonance) for you?

Themes:

1. Death

- What physical sensations does Topp use to describe Fin's feelings at the funeral? What emotional sensations? (pp. 11-13)
- Find the full lyrics for the Mutton Birds song 'Anchor Me' (pp. 12 and 14). Which words do you think are most meaningful to Fin at this time? Write the lyrics with an illustrated border.
- What are your own feelings about death? Compare them with Fin's feelings. (p. 15)
- Topp uses several similes and metaphors relating to death on page 15. For example: raffle, numbers, blocks, the big picture. Explain each phrase and say how it relates to death. Illustrate one of these metaphors using symbols/images only.
- Why did Fin 'leave his faith' at the door of the funeral? (p. 16)
- People often go through stages when grieving: denial, anger, avoidance, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Give examples of each stage from Fin's experiences. See pages 16-17, 65-67, 69-70.
- Mrs Higgins uses a ship as a metaphor for the afterlife. Do you think it's effective? Can you think of another metaphor?
- The rainbow is the 'perfect half of something complete'. (p. 126) What does this mean for Fin?
- The rainbow is symbolic for many cultures. Research its meanings and present as a poster.
- Describe Bobby's philosophy about death. (p. 132) How could Fin celebrate Mike's life? Write a eulogy that celebrates Mike's life and achievements.

2. Surfing

- Mike's surfing is described using many verbs. List the action words on page 43.
- Write a poem that uses only verbs to describe the action of your favourite sport. Cut an action-silhouette to go with the poem.
- What are the important skills in surfing? (p. 44) What is style?
- Holding your breath underwater can be intense (p. 45-46). Write a description of the experience.
- What is the 'law of the water'? (p. 49)
- Research 'big wave' surfing in Hawaii.

- In dreams, waves can symbolise strong emotions or the deep unconscious. What might they symbolise for Fin? (p. 139-140). Relate a water dream (or similar) of your own.
 - Chart the requirements for becoming a skilled surfer. (p. 145)
 - What is a 'soul surfer'? (p. 147) Does the label 'soul' apply to other sports or artforms? What motivates people to create?
 - Mike is anti-commercialism. How does commercialism affect sports such as rugby? Argue for or against commercial sponsorship in sport.
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3. Violence

- What message about fighting has Fin inherited from his grandfather? (p. 50)
 - Fin thinks he gets respect and recognition for being a tough guy. Does this happen in real life? How is recognition important for teenagers?
 - Fin often refers to rugby players and tough movie characters (e.g. Rambo, Terminator). Why does Fin admire these men? See pages 52 and 56.
 - What chemicals fuel Fin's aggression? (p. 56). Research the science behind this – is it true?
 - Read the fight scenes on pages 58-59 and 196-197. Who initiates the fights? Should Mike have intervened with violence? Should Fin have pushed Turei? Brainstorm other ways to settle the confrontations. Role-play an alternate non-violent version of the scenes.
 - Read Fin's speech about surfing violence on pages 133-135. How is this 'pack mentality' like the behaviour of gangs? Do you think surfers are really as aggressive as this? Is Fin winding Jack up?
 - What is revealed about Fin's aggressive nature on pages 153 and 188? How does this change your opinion of Fin?
 - Research the multiple causes of violence in society (domestic and social). Can any of these factors be changed?
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4. Debate Topics

- Violence and intimidation are sometimes justified.
 - Death is part of life.
 - There is no place for competition in the arts. (On page 148 Fin debates the merits of competition.)
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Exploring Language:

1. Exaggeration

- Topp uses over-the-top examples about the Mob and Rugby games to describe fear (p. 24). Invent some exaggerated situations that are the epitome of fear for you.
- He also uses exaggeration on page 56 to describe an impossibility. Write some improbable statements like this.

2. Clichés:

- Page 29 has several clichéd phrases: Hell hath no fury, slice of heaven, warm fuzzy. What does each mean? Why are these regarded as clichés? Topp reworks several clichés, such as the butterflies on page 178. Rephrase these clichés: raining cats and dogs, cat got your tongue, sleep like a baby.
- List the adjectives and metaphors used to describe the sea on page 35. Create a seascape painting that uses these sensory images to capture the mood and movement of the ocean.
- What metaphors and similes are used on pages 47-48 to describe the violence of surfing?
- Topp invents surfing words such as 'aquaverse' (p. 182). Suggest some other 'aqua' words.
- What language features does Topp use to build tension on page 41? How is the tension created in the fight on pages 58-59? Write a scene where there's a tense confrontation between people or animals.
- What metaphors are used for personal growth on page 187?

Character Study:

1. Fin

- What do you first discover about Fin from pages 19-25? Describe his personality, abilities, background. What do you think his strengths and weaknesses might be?
- What hooked him on surfing? (p. 23)
- What is his attitude to women? (p. 27) What do you think of this?
- What is his definition of 'cool'? (pp. 186-187)
- What does he think of the wealthy? (pp. 33-34). Why? List the negative words used to describe the rich (e.g. 'septic virus'). What other kind of sweeping judgements does he make? (p. 90)
- What self-revelation does he have at the roadside ceremony? (p. 83)
- How does Fin 'become' Mike in some ways? (e.g. pp. 120-121)

- What kind of language does Fin enjoy using? (e.g. pp. 133-134)
 - Has Fin grown and developed during the story? (p. 184) What has he discovered about physical strength versus emotional strength?
 - Is Fin a convincing, fully-rounded character? Give examples to support your answer.
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2. Mike

- Mike is an enigmatic character, seen mostly through Fin's eyes. How does this distance the reader from Mike?
 - Pages 145-147 reveal something of Mike's character. Is he elitist, just arrogant or something else? Does he have a competitive streak?
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3. Bobby

- What are his strengths?
 - How does Bobby help in Fin's healing?
 - Is Fin a substitute for Mike?
 - Read the speech on page 101 – what is his point? Do you agree with Bobby?
 - What changes Bobby? (p. 173)
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4. Jack

- Compare this city boy with the other men – give examples from his behaviour and appearance. (pp. 96, 97)
 - Why does Fin begin to warm to him? (p. 111) How does Jack's character develop on the beach trip?
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5. Jack's father

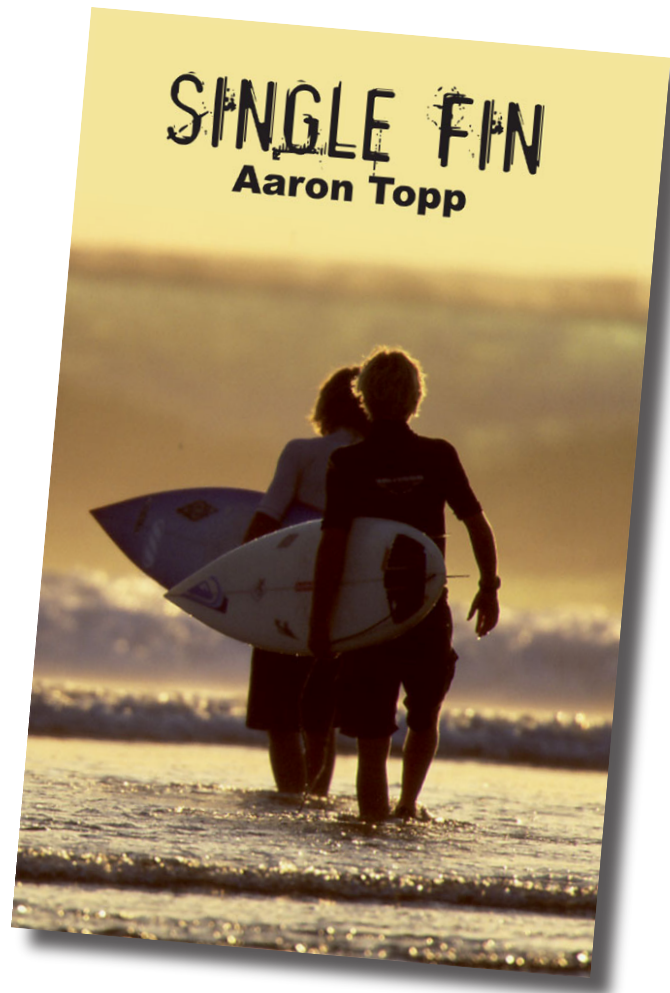
- Read his speech on page 87. What does it reveal about his character?
 - How did he think the farm would 'sort Jack out'?
 - What is the cycle he refers to on page 195? Why does this happen with many parents and children?
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6. Turei

- What are his obvious 'bad guy' credentials (appearance/ behaviour)?
 - What is his major character flaw?
 - What cycle is he stuck in? (p.196)
 - Is he a fully-rounded character in this book?
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7. Writing

- Character can be revealed through dialogue alone. Write some dialogue that shows what a character is like.
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Notes: