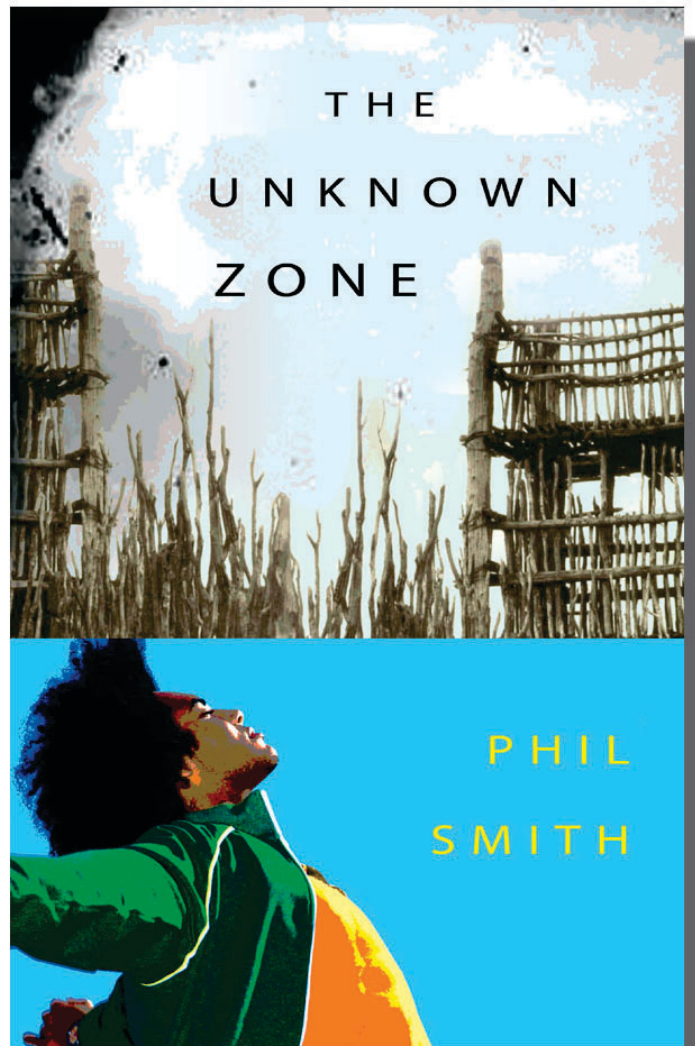
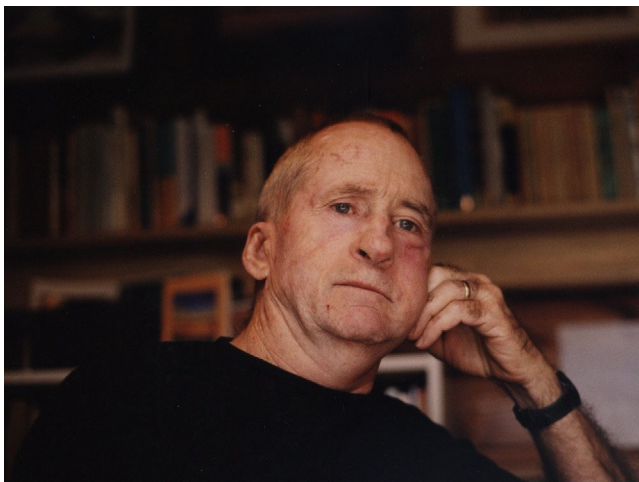


TEACHERS' RESOURCE KIT

THE UNKNOWN ZONE

A powerful, gripping and passionate tale of land rights, spirituality, coming-of-age and love from excellent new author,

PHIL SMITH



INCLUDING

- Readers' Notes
- Author Inspiration
- Editorial Comment
- Points for Discussion
- Creative Writing and Visual Response Ideas
- Drama Topics



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Synopsis

The Unknown Zone is told in two timelines: one starts in the 1960s, another in the 1860s.

1860s-1880s plot strand:

Rupert Revington is part of a team of Australian and English sealers who are ambushed and eventually kidnapped by Ngai Tahu tribe members on the West Coast of the South Island. Revington manages to form an alliance with another, peaceful Maori tribe, and soon his life is intimately intertwined with that of Anatohia, a young woman from his host tribe, the Ngati Wairangi. Legends about Rupert, Anatohia, and a beautiful pounamu pendant are passed down as a legacy for the Ngati Wairangi people and another allied tribe, the Ngati Hei. The pendant's form recalls the tale of how land and sea came to war, to grief, and then to reconciliation. Many years later, in the 20th century, the pendant itself is rediscovered by a young boy called Hemi Ratana, himself a descendant of the Ngai Tahu. The pendant helps him to knit together the details of his past, and start a new era of reconciliation between the people of the Kaimiro Valley and their land...

1960s-1980s plot strand:

Fifteen-year-old Hemi Ratana has been orphaned after his parents' major car accident. He is left in the unloving guardianship of an aunt and uncle, and at the mercy of a bullying older cousin. Although his life has become almost unbearably harsh, he discovers a huge personal strength in the wilds of his family's land, in the ancient Kauri forests of the Coromandel Peninsula. In the most magnificent of these ancient trees, he also discovers a strange, singular tomb. The skeleton of an old gum collector from the end of the 19th century still sits high in a tree-hut, and wears a mysterious key. This find eventually leads Hemi to discover an inheritance in greenstone treasure, land, and gold – and also to discover facts that alter not just his own fate, but the fate of the land and native tribes around him. The key links Hemi to a rich, astonishing past...

Character Evaluation

The main characters from each plot strand, although separated by culture and more than a century in time, each show enormous personal resolve, endurance and willingness to struggle through hardship. Each reaches a stronger sense of identity.

A core of self belief, doggedness and optimism helps each of the very different men to overcome apparently impossible challenges.

Writing Style

Nineteenth Century Plot Strand

For nigh on six months, since our gaff tops'l ketch the Arrow had sailed out of Sydney and landed us at Jackson Bay, our gang of twenty-eight souls had been harvesting seals in a bay known to the Maori folk as Okahu.'

Our sojourn on this ungodly coast had been fraught with tribulation of tempest foul and tempers raw. I was with a crew of tough men cast upon an hostile place to club tame and trusting creatures, even the pups, then strip their furry pelts and rend their pink blubber in cast-iron cauldrons like Macbeth's witches concocting some sinister spell.

Indeed how sick we'd got of seal meat, its sinews stuck betwixt our teeth, the reek of carcasses rolling in the tide, entrails swirling amongst the stones as carrion for the gulls.

Twentieth Century Plot Strand

His eyes ablaze with shame and rage, Hemi Ratana glared up from the undergrowth.

He slapped his hands against the tree's flank and felt the soles of his feet prickle with anticipation.

Plates of mauve and orange bark stippled the gargantuan trunk, while here and there dribbles of golden kauri gum hung like melted candlewax.

Cicadas made the fragrant summer air vibrate.

Thirteen metres above him, the Square Kauri's head branches arched out and upwards like triumphant arms above the surrounding forest.

Hemi was panting from an hour of scrambling up the Kaimiro Valley, following the old logging roads now overgrown with fern and supplejack. Scratched, muddy and groaning with embarrassment after a miserable attempt to match Tamatea's prowess in front of the girls, he gasped with pain and exertion.

His latest ordeal had begun when he was fishing in the pool under the waterfall. Tamatea arrived with Te Maika and her school friends, Rachel and Janet, to swim and dive from the rocks.

'Well, how's this, then?' Tamatea had bellowed when he saw Hemi. 'Monkey-boy is here, the boy who climbs trees. Hey, boy, we're playing Taunt the Taniwha. Prove to us you're not the son of a chimp, a loser like your old man!'

Author Inspiration

What motivated the author?

Phil Smith responds:

1. A fascination with the historical account of a gum-collector's skeleton that was found in the head branches of a kauri tree felled by loggers on the Coromandel in the 1950s.
2. In creating the back-story I discovered the plight of a party of sealers captured on the West Coast by Ngai Tahu marauders who used them for kai on their journey up the coast.
3. A keen interest in human nature, the Treaty of Waitangi, the Land Wars of the 1860s, the difficulty today in resolving Maori land claims and in the promotion of racial harmony in New Zealand.
4. The desire to tell a story that might hopefully entertain and enlighten readers, and in doing so to make the personal transition from newspaper journalism to creative writing.
5. A sympathy for young people who may be trying to find some meaning in life and achieve a sense of identity and purpose.

Any background information, eg. research, origins etc?

Phil says: Museums, libraries, the internet, photographs, visits to sites and locations throughout New Zealand.

Specifically I researched the greenstone trade, the kauri gum and timber industries, Maoritanga, and read a number of books on how to write fiction, as well a variety of novels. Much of the inspiration for the early part of the book came from my childhood experiences, my love of exploration, an insatiable curiosity, and from my continuing attraction to the natural environment, the outdoors, and the sea.

How did the illustrator interpret their task?

Phil says: The only illustration apart from the cover is a map of the primary location. This was drawn by an artist from a sketch I made so as to clearly describe the fictional area where the story is mainly set, and to help readers to get a sense of where things are.

Any problems/difficulties encountered?

Phil says: Calculating the timeframe – I had to cover the progress of two sets of characters over a span of more than 170 years, and to show the progressive maturation of the main character over a period of roughly 20 years. This involved the creation of whakapapa and the drawing of more maps and sketches. I enjoyed learning how, thanks to my editor Emma Neale's invaluable guidance, to change emotionless, cardboard-cutout characters into more vibrant and convincing people, and to understand how motive affects behaviour.

Editorial Comment

The Unknown Zone gathers together a wide variety of writing styles – there are not only the contemporary and imitation nineteenth century styles, but also legends, prose poems and 'mock documents' (letters, wills, newspaper and magazine articles). These will trigger useful discussion about form and register, and can also lead to discussion about literary genres like realism, the epistolary novel, the adventure or captivity narrative, and historical romance. This multifaceted style will help to keep reluctant readers engaged.

Points for Discussion

Issues:

Teachers and students can discuss the following topics as they arise in the novel:

- colonial history in Australia and New Zealand
- land rights for native peoples
- myth and legend
- environmental and conservation issues – including the relationship between personal identity and the natural world
- spirituality
- fate versus chance
- the nature of inheritance (inheriting personality, beliefs, and also money: is inheriting money or property always fair, or a good or moral thing?).

Essay or Discussion topics:

- Discuss what the novel tells us about family relationships.
- Discuss what the novel tells us about relying on our own decisions.
- Discuss what the novel tells us about how we should treat our natural environment.
- Discuss what the novel shows us about what the natural world can teach humans.
- Discuss how the novel would make a good action film.
- Show how the novel fits into the coming-of-age genre.
- Does the novel seem to have a message about racial harmony?
- Discuss how the novel treats history and legend.
- What did you find the most shocking event in the novel? Explain.
- How important is the love story at the end of the novel?
- Discuss how any major event in history has affected your family (parents, grandparents, great grandparents). Does it still affect you?

Creative Writing & Visual Response Ideas

- Imagine you are Bart Larkin and you have to recommend Hemi for a top management position in a new company. Write a full character reference for him.
- Imagine you are a film producer trying to convince a funding body that *The Unknown Zone* could be turned into a great movie. Write up your proposal, and offer one or two scenes from the novel turned into a film script to help persuade the sponsor.
- Find three or four of the strongest similes in the novel. Use these as the first lines of each stanza in a three- or four-verse poem that tells either Hemi's or Rupert Revington's story.
- In some ways, *The Unknown Zone* is an extended eulogy (song of praise) for the giant kauri. Write a eulogy – in prose or poetry (if prose, a maximum of 500 words) – for some aspect of the natural world that has had a powerful influence on you.

Visual Responses:

- Imagine the novel has to be reprinted and released with a new cover for an overseas market. Design a suitable cover for the new readership.
- Imagine the novel is going to be turned into a stage play. Design a suitable set, programme notes and advertising poster for the play.
- Choose a character from the novel and create a visual work that expresses something of their personality. Write a brief artist's statement to accompany it.
- Design a logo for a company that you like and think is honest and reliable.
- Paint or draw an image of the pounamu Moanawhakamana that is described in the novel.

Drama Topics

- Find out a little about how street theatre has been used for political agitation since the 1900s. Choose a political cause that you feel strongly about, and write and perform a short (10 minutes maximum) piece that aims to raise awareness and persuade your audience to take political action. Perform this for the class.
- Write and perform a stage version of the Legend of the Moanawhakamana. Perform this for the class.
- Turn one of the encounters between Hemi and his cousin into a scene for stage or film. Perform this for the class.