

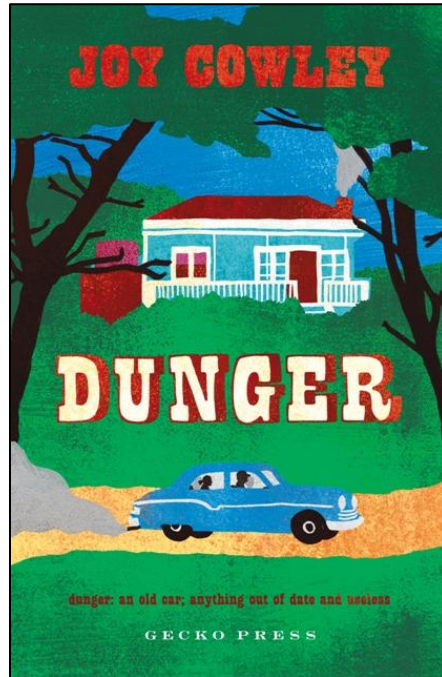


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Teaching Notes

Dunger

by Joy Cowley



Synopsis

William and Melissa have been roped into helping their old hippie grandparents fix up their holiday home in the middle of the Sounds.

They have no electricity, no cellphone reception, and only each other for company. As far as they are concerned, this is not a holiday. But after experiencing a different way of life with their grandparents, and the myriad of adventures, misadventures and challenges that come with it, have their attitudes, relationships, skills and view of living changed for the better?



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The Author

Joy Cowley is one of New Zealand's best-loved writers whose work is enjoyed by children all around the world. She began writing for children at the age of 16 when she had an after-school job editing the children's page for a local newspaper. Since then she has written and published books, stories and learning materials for both children and adults. She has been awarded an OBE for her services to children's writing, the A W Reed Award for Contribution to NZ Literature, and the Prime Minister's Prize for Literary Achievement. After many years living in the Marlborough Sounds, Joy now lives in Wellington, New Zealand.

Themes

This highly readable pre-teen novel has several themes.

The main theme explored is the complexity of family relationships. Melissa and William's holiday sees them dealing with their own fraught sibling relationship, trying to come to terms with trust issues they have with their parents, and puzzling over the mystery of the seemingly dysfunctional marital relationship of their grandparents. These relationship dynamics are explored, tested and resolved as the events of the novel unfold.

Another theme evident is the differences and similarities between generations. Through spending enforced time together, Melissa and William discover a new level of respect and love for their grandparents, as knowledge, traditions and skills are passed on to the next generation. This is alongside a realisation and appreciation of a shared family history and personality traits.

The theme of the difference between town and country living is explored. After their time living a more simple way of life with no creature comforts, Melissa and William have a new-found appreciation for both town and country lifestyles and the different positives and negatives that come with each.

A further theme in the book is that of technology. When Melissa and William arrive at the holiday house they realise they will be living a pioneer style existence. Melissa's distraught reaction when she realises she cannot use her cellphone is indicative of not only how far technology has progressed but also how dependent people can become on it. However, when she eventually can use



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her cellphone it becomes a crucial help during an emergency. This seems to acknowledge that while time away from it can be beneficial technology is also extremely useful.

Motivation is another theme in the book. When Melissa and William agree to stay with their grandparents they are initially motivated by money. However, when they realise they have been duped they react in different ways. They both eventually accept the reasons behind their grandparents' decision were ultimately altruistic and realise that they are now motivated to help and be with their grandparents for the sheer joy of it, rather than for mercenary reasons.

The theme of humanity is also explored. When an emergency situation develops at the holiday house the gambit of human reaction, both physical and emotional, is illustrated, ranging from frailty to bravery. They all rise to the challenge and using skills they have learnt, and strength they did not know they had, they band together to help, support and save their family.

Activities

1. Before reading the book, look at the cover image and title. Discuss what you think this story might be about?
2. The narrative of the book is related by the characters William and Melissa whose points of view are told in alternate chapters. Choose a passage about one of the main events of the novel. Re-write the passage as a monologue in another character's voice, for example Grandma or Grandpa. Think about the kind of vocabulary your chosen character would use, and how their opinion of the event might differ. Present your monologue to your class.
3. The first hint that the book is set firmly in New Zealand is when Melissa and William are devastated to learn that their holiday to Queenstown has been cancelled by their parents (p. 9). Find any other places that are mentioned in the book. Locate these places on a map of New Zealand. Choose one of the places mentioned and create and design an entry for a travel book. Include information, such as population size, geography, history, things of interest, weather, etc.



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4. The title of the book *Dunger* is a colloquialism. What is the definition of a colloquialism? List some examples of colloquialisms you are aware of from your home country. Below is a list of further sayings taken from the book. Try to find their origins and then draw a cartoon representation of each of them, as well as three of your own colloquialisms:
 - 'Bob's your uncle' (p. 43)
 - 'getting on like a house on fire' (p. 47)
 - 'fit as a fiddle' (p. 96)
 - 'use elbow grease' (p. 110)
 - 'shut your cake-hole' (p. 120)
 - 'where there's a will there's a way' (p. 140)
 - 'as tough as old boots' (p. 155)

5. Figurative language is used to convey ideas that might otherwise be difficult to express. One example of figurative language is simile. The author particularly uses food and animal imagery in similes, for example, the guitar 'sounds dreamy mellow, like chocolate and cream' (p. 98) and Will gets bored easily 'like a grasshopper on hot sand' (p. 123). Find six more examples of animal or food similes from the book.

6. In groups, discuss the following: Do you like Melissa and William as characters? What do you think of their reactions to different situations and what do their reactions tell us about them and their personalities? Do you think they have a realistic brother-sister relationship? Do you think their relationship is similar to that of their grandparents? Why/Why not? Do you believe that their relationship, as well as their relationship with their grandparents, develops and changes through the book? If so, what are the main events which contribute to the development and change?

7. Melissa feels that her grandparents adopt a 'crazy pioneer lifestyle' while staying at the holiday house (p. 67). Using this as inspiration, write, illustrate and publish a picture book about, or an illustrated manual for, a pioneer family, including at least one of the relevant activities and skills Melissa and William learn from their grandparents, for example, baking bread, fishing, washing in a tub, etc.



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8. One of Melissa's jobs is to help Grandma sort through old family photographs and write a description for those they decide to keep (p. 75). Create a 'photo' album of the characters mentioned in the book. Draw their 'photo' portrait based on the physical descriptions in the book, for example, Grandma and Grandpa (p. 49) and Mr Hoffmeyer (p. 95). Then write a paragraph character description to accompany them.
9. Melissa thinks her Grandma 'lived in the age of the dinosaurs' and her world is entirely different (p. 101). Find an historical event and/or figure mentioned by, or in relation to, the grandparents and their younger days to research, for example, Bob Dylan (p. 43), Betty Grable (p. 50), Vietnam War (p. 64) or Stirling Moss (p. 90). Present your findings in the style of an illustrated encyclopaedia entry.
10. Choose your favourite scene from the book and create your own artistic interpretation of it. Use, for example, a diorama, painting, model, poem, cartoon strip, movie storyboard, video, etc. Or, create an illustrated timeline of the main events of the novel.
11. In groups imagine you are film producers attempting to gain financial backing to turn *Dunger* into a feature film. Write up your proposal, include one or two scenes from the novel in film script form, your choices for the soundtrack, casting, location, etc.
12. Which is your favourite chapter in the book? Why? Write a plot summary of it.
13. Review the book for your favourite magazine or website. What did you like about the book? Why? What did you dislike about the book? Why? Give it a rating, such as stars or a number out of ten.
14. The cover artwork and design is by Keely O'Shannessy. What do you like/dislike about it? Design your own version of the cover.
15. Joy Cowley is an award-winning author. Research and write a short biography about her include her other books, such as the following Gecko Press books: *Snake and Lizard*, *Friends: Snake and Lizard*, *The Fierce Little Woman and the Wicked Pirate*, *Stories of the Wild West Gang* and *Just One More*.