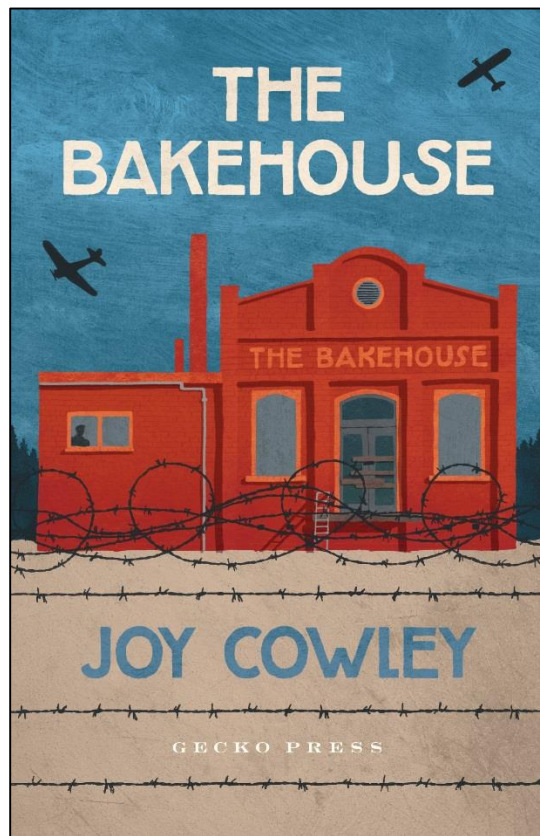


Teaching Notes  
*The Bakehouse* by Joy Cowley



**Synopsis**

Bert is eleven and living in New Zealand. He wants nothing more than to fight in the war - to handle weapons, defend his country, and have a life filled with adventure. But he soon learns that the secrets and danger of war do not always stay at the front line. Little does he know that peaceful suburban New Zealand can be a place of secrets and danger, and that one boy's actions can change everything.

**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 AW 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 warm, powerful war story which shows the lives of ordinary people in suburban New Zealand who feel threatened and worried, has several themes.

The first of these includes the chaos of war. Despite living in suburban New Zealand the effects of World War II are starting to permeate society, from the American soldiers taking out Jean and Aunty Vi, to the military police searching Bert's family home for a deserter. War and the inevitable chaos that ensues are evident.

Other themes relating to war include patriotism, sacrifice and loyalty. These are illustrated by Aunty Vi's husband fighting overseas, Reggie's father being a member of the Home Guard and Bert's family living with war shortages and rationing. Douglas' desertion from the army calls into sharp focus the terror and potentially traumatic consequences that will affect a citizen who will not fight for his country. Bert's loyalty is also displayed and tested as he looks after, and then betrays not only Douglas, but also his sister.

The theme of the complexities of family relationships is also explored, from Bert and Betty's sibling rivalry to Father's disapproval of Aunty Vi's behaviour. Wartime and the pressures it brings have significant effects on the harmony of the family unit.

A further theme delves into the expectations society has during this era, particularly for women. This is shown when Jean's morals are questioned and her predicament with an American soldier is frowned upon and hushed up.

Courage, strength and determination in the face of adversity are also themes. These attributes help Betty, Jean and Douglas as they overcome all the hurdles they encounter during wartime, even though they are in suburban New Zealand, and not on the front line.

Another theme is that of the vicious cycle of secrets, lies and betrayals. Bert, Betty and Meg are confronted with a serious and adult problem, which forces them into keeping secrets and leads them to lying to their family and society. The secrets and lies get too much for Bert and in the end his ultimate betrayal of his sister is a secret truth that has continued to haunt him and his family.

A final theme is that of humanity. The book shows how humans will help or hinder each other in times of crises, from Betty protecting Douglas to Father shunning Jean. The spectrum of human kindness, particularly in stressful times, is on display in the book.

### Activities

1. Before reading the book, look at the cover image and title. Discuss what you think the book might be about?
2. There are many language features in the book, for example, similes, metaphors, idioms, slang, colloquialisms, personification, alliteration and onomatopoeia. Find the definition of each and then match each with one of the examples below, before finding more examples from the book.
  - a) The enemy would drop like skittles (p. 22)
  - b) *Pow! Pow!* Bodies littered the sand! (p. 22)
  - c) Aunty Vi is a good egg (p. 34)
  - d) Loose lips sink ships (p. 48)
  - e) But vegetable gardens sulked in winter (p. 60)
  - f) Cross my heart (p. 67)
  - g) Meg was an angel (p. 86)
  - h) Now she's up the duff (p. 89)
  - i) I wouldn't mind putting her shoes under my bed (p. 130)
3. Vocabulary relating to war features in the book, such as the Home Guard (p. 44), deserters (p. 54), a military camp (p. 55), civvies (p. 84), and prisoner-of-war camps (p. 132). Find some more examples from the book. Use the author's style as inspiration to write your own descriptive paragraph or poem using war vocabulary as the title or within the body of your text, for example: 'the war was always there, like a big hungry ghost that poured itself out of the radio to haunt the house' (p. 113) and 'like there were drops of blood in his brain, hard as red bullets bouncing against his skull and exploding' (p. 130).
4. The narrative of the book is in the third person. Why do you think the author chose to do this? Is it effective? Choose a passage about one of the main events of the book. Re-write the passage as a first person narrative, such as a monologue or a diary entry, in the voice of any character other than Bert, for example, Betty, Meg, Aunty Vi, Mother, Father or Douglas. Think about the kind of vocabulary your chosen character would use, and how their perspective of the event might differ from Bert's. Present your monologue, or read your diary entry aloud, to your class.
5. The book explores the relationship between the characters Bert and Betty. In groups, discuss the following:
  - a) Do you like Bert and Betty as characters?
  - b) Do you think they have a realistic brother-sister relationship? Why or why not?
  - c) What do you think of their reactions to different situations and what do their reactions tell us about them and their personalities?



- d) Do you think they teach each other any significant lessons about themselves and other characters? If so, what?
  - e) Do you believe that their relationship develops and changes through the book? If so, what are the main events which contribute to the development and change?
6. The book is set in suburban New Zealand in the 1940s and is full of descriptions of different interiors and exteriors, such as the Kilbirnie house (p. 21), the bakehouse (p. 24) and the sea and sky (p. 27). Choose a description from the book and draw your interpretation of it. Then, write a description of an interior or exterior that you are familiar with, for example, your classroom, school grounds, bedroom, a local park, etc. In pairs, draw a picture based on your partner's descriptions.
7. Gecko Press publisher, Julia Marshall, states: "I love this book. It's probably my favourite Joy Cowley novel. I feel it tells a really important story, both historically and morally. It will get readers of all ages thinking, 'What would I have done?' ". As a class, divide into groups to discuss this statement. Do you agree or disagree? Present your group's conclusions to your class. Does your group agree or disagree, or share the same opinion as any of the other groups? Next, divide your class into debating teams and hold a debate with the following moot:
- Bert's decision to tell the soldiers about Douglas was the right thing to do.
8. Create an illustrated timeline of the main events of the novel, or choose your favourite moment from the book and create your own artistic interpretation of it, for example, a diorama, painting, model, poem, cartoon strip, movie storyboard, video, etc. Write a brief artist's statement to accompany your interpretation.
9. Complete one of the following tasks inspired by the book:
- a) Find and research a figure and/or place mentioned in the book, such as, Geronimo (p. 19), Aladdin's cave of treasure (p. 25), the Duke of Wellington (p. 30), borstal (p. 64) Betty Grable (p. 90) and the city of Cologne (p. 104). Present your findings in the style of an entry in a children's illustrated encyclopaedia.
  - b) Erueti talks about his Maori relations, his whakapapa and the importance of knowing your ancestors (p. 15). Research and write your own whakapapa or family tree.
  - c) Bert describes what his school is like (p. 31). Research and list any similarities and/or differences from school today, for example, class size, materials available, curriculum, discipline, etc. Present your findings as a powerpoint to your class.
  - d) The book mentions different forms of media used for communication in suburban New Zealand in the 1940s, such as the BBC radio channel (p. 33) and the *Southern Cross* newspaper (p. 44). Choose one of the major events of World War II. Either write and perform a radio news report or write a newspaper



article. Research and use the style and language that would have been used in the 1940s.

- e) Bert and his family are subject to rationing and shortages with their 'slop' (p. 87) and powdered eggs (p. 113). Design a marketing campaign to inform the general public about rationing and its importance in the war effort. Think of a catchy slogan for your campaign - in the same vein as the two war slogans mentioned in the book 'Loose lips sink ships' (p. 48) and 'Dig for Victory' (p. 60). Alongside your slogan, the campaign could also include elements such as pamphlets, scripts for school talks, radio jingles, posters, etc.
- f) Bert and Betty discuss which provisions they would need in order to set up a bomb shelter in the bakehouse (pp. 46-47). Make an illustrated list of provisions that you would have taken, and your reasons for choosing them.
- g) Imagine you have been ordered to fight in a war and have decided to be a 'conscientious objector' (p. 56). Write a letter expressing your feelings or objections to fighting to your local politician.
- h) Bert and Erueti discuss the need for war (p. 136). As a class, discuss whether or not you think your country needs an army. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper saying why or why not. If possible, use recent war news in your argument.
- i) Bert writes a letter of sympathy to a teacher at his school after her husband Lieutenant Holt dies at sea when his ship is torpedoed (p. 125). Find out how many men in your local area died in World War II. Research one of these soldiers and then either write an obituary or a letter of sympathy to their family.

10. Which is your favourite chapter in the book? Why? Write a plot summary of it.

11. In groups, imagine you are film producers attempting to gain financial backing to turn *The Bakehouse* into a feature film. Write up your proposal and include one or two scenes from the novel as a film script, your choices for the soundtrack, casting, location, costumes, etc. Or imagine the novel is going to be turned into a stage play. Design a suitable set, programme notes and advertising posters for the play.

12. 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. Consider the following questions when writing your review:

- a) Which characters appealed to you the most? The least?
- b) How did the story make you feel as it unfolded?
- c) What ideas in the book awakened your interest?
- d) What did you dislike, or find boring?
- e) Do you think this is a significant book?
- f) Why is this book important for today's readers?



13. The cover artwork and design is by Keely O'Shannessy. What do you like/dislike about it? Design your own version of the cover.
  
14. Joy Cowley is an award-winning author. Research and write a short biography about her and 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*, *Just One More* and *Dunger*.