

***Soldier on the Hill* – Jackie French**

"The hole was moving! The walls were falling down ... There was a rope under his arms. There was a face above. An anxious face, yelling something down to him, something he didn't understand; a strange face, with something wrong about the eyes. Tanned skin, unshaven, black hair a it too long ... Joey knows there is a Japanese soldier hiding in the hills. It was a Japanese man, a soldier, who hauled him out of the mineshaft, who lit the fire to bring the searchers, and then disappeared. But nobody believes Joey. After all, it is World War 2 and children have nightmares ... Joey knows he will have to find the soldier himself ... he must find him ... could he be part of the invasion force ... could he be sending messages to waiting submarines?"

In another brilliant historical fiction novel from much loved children's author, Jackie French, Joey is mysteriously rescued from a mineshaft by a Japanese soldier. During his recovery, it becomes Joey's mission to find the soldier in the hills and to prove his existence to the people of Biscuit Creek. After a number of encounters with the soldier, Joey gradually develops a deep respect for him and begins to repay the soldier for his earlier kindness. Ultimately, as the story reaches its dramatic conclusion, we begin to understand people's capacity to rise above age, cultural and political barriers despite the hardship and tragic outcomes of war.

Suitable for years 6 to 9.

CHARACTERS

Questions for discussion

Joey

- What sort of person is Joey?
- Why does Joey feel the need to find the soldier despite his fear and confusion about the soldier's kindness?
- Why does Joey feel alone and isolated?
- What do you think drew Joey towards Miss Tidcome and Joe Reardon?
- How do his friendships with these two people affect his experience of living in a new town?
- When does Joey begin to be included in activities with the other kids at school?
- How does the fact that Myrtle befriends Joey change his experience in Biscuit Creek?
- Why do you think Joey was relieved when he, Myrtle and Joe's dog, Meg, failed to find the soldier?
- After Joey learns of his father's death, what connection does he make between his dad and the Japanese soldier?
- How might you interpret Joey's action of leaving a parcel of biscuits and other foods for the soldier?

- As well as delivering biscuits, what else does Joey do when he visits the soldier's hideaway?
- How do Joey's feelings towards the soldier change over time?
- Why do you think Joey was so careful and considered in his actions after he found the dead soldier?

The Japanese soldier

- What was some of the evidence that began to accumulate in support of Joey's belief that the soldier actually existed? (E.g. Joe Reardon's lost shirt and the removal of rabbits from his traps; fire embers under the rock overhang; damage caused to Joe Reardon's shed.)
- How do you think the soldier might spend his time and what sort of feelings might he experience while alone on the hill?
- What assistance does the soldier provide after Joe's accident with the axe?
- What do you think motivated the Japanese soldier to help Joey and Joe during their separate accidents?
- How does the soldier die and what happens to his few belongings?

Feemie (Joey's Mum)

- Feemie's husband is "Missing in Action". What are the immediate consequences of his absence?
- Why does she move back to the town of her childhood?
- How do you imagine she might feel about living with her sister?
- What is the cause of friction between Feemie and her sister Lallie?
- How does Feemie react when she finally learns that her husband is dead? (E.g. Joey explains to Myrtle that the news wasn't really a shock to Feemie because she'd felt all along that her husband was dead.)
- When the package of Christmas presents and the letter from Joey's dad arrive (sent before his death), how do both Joey and Feemie react?
- What action does Feemie take to help Joe, her old school friend, after his accident with the axe?

Aunt Lallie

- How does Aunt Lallie cope with the fact that her husband and two sons are off fighting the war?
- In what ways does she occupy herself during their absence?

Myrtle Gleeson

- Why do you think Joey originally disliked Myrtle?
- What reasons does Myrtle give Joey for the townspeople's denial of the soldier's existence?
- Why does she say that everyone in the town keeps themselves so busy?

- How is Myrtle's family affected by the war?
- Myrtle's mother wears the two-star brooch of a mother with two sons overseas. How do you think this would make her feel and in what ways might people have reacted to this?
- What happens within Myrtle's family after they are notified of Fred's death? (E.g. Myrtle's parents became very protective and restricted her freedom; Myrtle could no longer eat the produce from the bakery because it reminded her of Fred.)

Miss Tidcome

- According to Joey's mum, what do people say about Miss Tidcome?
- What is Miss Tidcome's theory on the disappearance of her cats?
- How does Miss Tidcome become more involved in the life of her local community towards the end of the story?
- What do you think led to this involvement?

Joe Reardon

- Why does Joe keep to himself?
- What caused Joe's injuries and how does the accident initially affect his life?
- What was the source of the mystery surrounding Joe's padlocked shed?
- Which equipment does Joe use to listen illegally for enemy submarine transmissions?
- What happens to Joe after he and Joey argue about the radio transmitter?
- How is Joe's life enhanced after his accident with the axe?

THEMES

- War
- Family Conflict
- Death
- Displacement
- Safety
- Communication - cables, telegrams, mail and etc.
- Strength of the human spirit
- How war changes lives - the soldiers off fighting and the people left behind: Many young men went to war and never returned. Those who did survive often had horrific memories and had seen friends and enemies die. Others still were left with the physical and emotional scars of war. Similarly, the Second World War greatly affected those who did not serve in the forces. Men, women and children in many countries experienced unprecedented changes to their lives. The impact this conflict had on the civilian way of life from evacuees to internees, factory workers and the Women's Land Army was life-changing and had far-reaching consequences.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- There are a number of reasons why people don't believe that Joey was rescued by a Japanese soldier. Discuss.
(E.g. While Joey is recovering in hospital, Sister says: "Pain makes you think all sorts of things. Pain and terror too. The best of us see things when we're in pain, that are never there. You understand?")
Name some other reasons that people may not have believed Joey.
Joey himself thinks it's because he's a kid. (See page 50.)
Do you agree with this and why?
- Discuss the role of the Biscuit Creek Gazette in the story.
- After Joey's experience in the mine shaft, he never wanted to smell dirt again. How might this be similar to the soldiers' experience of life in the trenches?
- Joey's mission was to find the Japanese soldier who had rescued him.
What do you think motivated him?
(E.g. pg 51 "He bet the kids wouldn't call him Bomb Dodger ..." if he went back up the hill and searched for the soldier.)
- What impact did rationing have on life for the soldiers fighting the war and those left at home?
- Discuss the reasons Joey decided against reporting the soldier's death.
- Discuss some of the foods that were substituted for products that were unavailable during wartime.
(E.g. On p166, one of the Biscuit Creek Gazette reader's recommends the use of ground wheat in the absence of coffee.)

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP WORK

- Choose an aspect of World War 2 to research and write a fictional account of an event through the eyes of a child your age.
- Present an overview of Australia's involvement in World War 2.
- Research some activities that the women and children might have been involved in on the home front.
(E.g. Which traditional male jobs were women and children required to undertake during wartime?)
- Investigate the term "Missing in Action" and discuss the ways in which people at home might have been notified that their loved ones were missing. How might they have verified these reports?
- Find some information about the badges worn by women on the home front, identifying them as the mothers of children at war.
- Present an account of the different methods of communication used during World War 2. How do these methods differ from today's forms of communication in terms of speed and accuracy?
- Compile a list of scenarios explaining the circumstances surrounding the Japanese soldier's arrival in Australia.
- Research the quantities and types of food available during rationing and plan a week's meals for a household of four.
- Find out why clothing and footwear was rationed and the ways in which clothes were recycled.

- (E.g. Many women unravelled old jumpers to re-knit into socks and warm clothing for the soldiers fighting the war.)
- Create an alternative ending to the story.
 - Write a diary with the Japanese soldier as the author.
 - Consider the resolve Joey made in relation to the soldier's few remaining belongings.

WEBSITES OF INTEREST

- www.anzacday.org.au/history/ww2/ww2main.html
ANZAC Day Commemoration Committee of Queensland
- www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk
Lots of interesting background information on World War 2
- www.worldwar-2.net
World War 2 timeline information
- www.war-experience.org
Details many personal war stories as well as presenting many photographic images
- www.awm.gov.au
The Australian War Memorial in Canberra