



THE BESTSELLING BOOK

**TOMORROW,
WHEN
THE WAR
BEGAN**

AS SEEN ON ABC TV

JOHN MARSDEN

Exploring the Text

1. The series of books by John Marsden, which begins with *Tomorrow, When the War Began*, has been read and enjoyed by thousands of young people all over the world. Now that you have finished reading the first book in the series, what would entice you to read the others? What, if anything, would deter you from reading the others?
2. What might be your parents' reaction if you had been invited to camp in Hell? Try writing one conversation where your parents seem like they could be persuaded and another conversation where they are absolutely opposed to the plan.
3. Homer and Lee reacted in very different ways to Ellie's invitation. Why? Consider the personality and the background of each boy and explain your ideas and reasons clearly.
4. Ellie said, '**No, Hell wasn't anything to do with places, Hell was to do with people. Maybe Hell was people**' (p. 44). Do you agree with Ellie? You might like to refer to historic events, stuff that is happening in the world right now, and/or your own life experiences to support your opinion.
5. Have you ever been camping? Would you say you had authentic contact with nature and the bush when you were camping? How do you think you would manage if you were camping completely on your own – no human contact – in the bush for a weekend?
6. Describe a place which is special to you in the way that Hell is special to Ellie and her friends. What are the similarities? What are the contrasts?
7. As a result of some of her observations, Ellie was starting to feel uneasy by the time they left Hell. Why was she afraid to ask questions?
8. When the friends realised they were alone they looked immediately to Ellie for leadership – without any discussion. What qualities did Ellie have that inspired their confidence?
9. When Ellie realised that she had led Corrie and Kevin into a trap in Mrs Alexander's garden, she felt she had been arrogant in assuming a leadership role (p. 85–6). In your opinion did Ellie make a good leader in that particular situation? Explain in detail.
10. Think about Homer. He was '**wild, outrageous. He didn't care what he did or what anyone thought . . . He had a radium heart . . .**' Yet he was '**becoming more surprising with every passing hour**' and the friends were beginning to recognise Homer as a leader. What was '**Homer's genius**' (p. 111)? Had there been some sort of transformation in him, or a transformation in his friends' understanding of him? Or was he always more complex than they had realised? Give evidence to support your opinion.
11. Do you know anyone who is like Homer? Describe your character. Are you tempted to try to change this person? If so, what would it take to achieve a change? If you don't have any desire to change them, why is that so?

- 11.** Ellie sees the helicopter as **'a great big, ugly, dark thing'** (114) Has anything ever overshadowed your life? Describe it. If not, what could you imagine that might represent such a threatening shadow? It might not necessarily be an object – it could be an emotion, a situation, a person or even an attitude.
- 12.** After the bombing of Corrie's home by the **'black jet, fast and lethal'** the friends were showing an ever-increasing sense of responsibility (p. 113–21). Evaluate their decisions. Were they wise decisions? What other decisions would you have suggested they make, had you been there at the time?
- 13.** Consider Robyn and her habit of fainting at the thought of needles and blood (p. 129). Where do you think she gains her extraordinary bravery and, as Ellie suggested, heroism? Does she surprise even herself? Explain.
- 14.** When Ellie found Chris asleep on guard duty, she was shocked at the violence of her reaction, which she describes as being like **'a raging monster'** (p. 161). How do you explain her reaction? Was it justified?
- 15.** When Robyn, Corrie, Kevin and Chris returned after their 'time spent on reconnaissance' near the showgrounds, Ellie reflected on all the laws they had broken (p. 220–2). Right now, in this country, are there any laws which you feel it might be okay to break? In what circumstances might it be morally justifiable to do so? Are there any laws right now which are not okay for anyone to break, under any circumstances? Are governments the only authorities that should make laws for the whole population? Does your answer to that question depend at all on the system of government in the country – e.g. is a democracy different to a dictatorship or an autocracy in this respect? Historically, can you name three examples of past laws in this country which should have been broken by people at the time when those laws were in force? Can you name five past laws in other countries which should have been broken by people at the time when those laws were in force? Are there any rules currently in force at your school which you feel it is morally justifiable to ignore or disobey? If so, why?
- 16.** Ellie raised the idea **'I suppose we should have been delighted at the thought of not going to school but we weren't'** (p. 238).
- To what extent do you 'use your brains' at school? In what subject do you find you need to use the most brainpower? Why that subject?
 - What is it about school that you find most challenging? Most interesting? Least interesting?
 - Are there better ways to learn? Explain.
- 17.** Each of the friends was very honest when explaining how he or she felt about renewing the efforts to make a difference. What were the strong personal feelings of each of the friends about what had already been achieved? (p. 238–43).
- 18.** Read page 249. You are Homer. Tell the story of the disaster that followed the incident where he'd 'taken all the screws out of the Principal's lectern in the Assembly Hall'. Exaggeration might be a useful stylistic device to use in this piece of writing.

19. John Marsden clearly has a talent for making the most dangerous of acts perpetrated by his young characters absolutely credible. Discuss:
 - a. his understanding of young people
 - b. his ability to make his characters so alive.
20. *Tomorrow, When the War Began* makes us think about the possibility of war. Why would anyone want to invade Australia? Has anyone, in your opinion, ever successfully invaded Australia? Has anyone tried to invade Australia and failed?
21. What do you think the use of both past and future tenses in the title of the book could be suggesting?
22. Give reasons why you would or would not recommend this book to your friends.

Conversation Points

Feelings and thoughts

Ellie suggests that when she has to write a true account of the friends' experiences that **'little things can get in the way. Little things like feelings, emotions'** (p. 1).

- Where do feelings come from?
- Does a thought come before a feeling or a feeling come before a thought or can they be simultaneous?
- What did Ellie feel about Lee?
- What did Ellie think of Lee?
- Do you think a person's gender affects how a person feels emotions and expresses emotions?
- Do you think people of different nationalities expression emotions in different ways? If so, how do they differ?
- Do you think Australians are generally emotionally healthy people? Are expressions of emotion valued and respected in this country?

Attitudes and cultures

- Homer and Lee come from very different cultures. Define the word 'culture'.
- In what ways are the thoughts and attitudes of Homer and Lee influenced by their culture?
- Language can be a significant cultural difference. What other differences between people can you attribute to culture? Name as many as you can.
- If music and dress are a part of our culture, think about the music and dress favoured by you, your parents and your grandparents. Do you think that different generations have different cultures?
- What is the difference between culture and environment?
- Have culture and environment affected Homer, Fiona, Kevin and Lee differently?

Death and dying

Ellie's friends were no strangers to fear. Homer admitted to the group **'My teeth were chattering so bad I had to hold my mouth shut to keep them in. I don't know how I didn't vomit. I was absolutely convinced I was going to die'** (p. 241).

- Are there circumstances where dying in a war situation can be justified?
- Is it fairer if the enemy dies?

- Is it fairer when older people die than when young people die?
- Is dying fair when it happens to bad people as well as good?

Loyalty – courage – goodness – friendship

‘Loyalty, courage, goodness. I wonder if they’re human inventions too, or if they just are’ (p. 284).

- Do we ‘invent’ courage?
- Does courage come before an act or does an act only become an act of courage when we look back on it?
- Is a courageous person always good?
- Are some actions more foolish than courageous? Describe one.
- Is a good friend a loyal friend?
- Can you think of any situations where being loyal to a friend might cause problems?
- Were the good friends in *Tomorrow, When the War Began* good for each other?
- Can a family provide more support than friends?
- In some families, are children damaged more than they are helped and supported? How can such problem situations be addressed and improved?

Help – giving and receiving

‘I don’t know how long we’ll be here. Maybe as long as the Hermit . . . We’ve got to stick together, that’s all I know’ (p. 284)

- Which would you prefer: to help your friends or to have your friends help you?
- Do you help people because they might help you in turn?
- Do you only help people you like?
- What would make you help someone you really disliked?
- How do you feel when you help someone and they do not thank you?
- Should we always expect thanks for help or a favour?
- Apart from the obvious reasons, why are humans so selective about which other living creatures they help and which they ignore or destroy?

Anything Goes

First try a brainstorm. See if you can think of a really original way to present your favourite scene from the novel. You might like to try one of the following activities.

- **A photographic presentation:** Set up the scene, dress as the characters or think of symbols to represent the scene and start ‘shooting’.
- **A frieze:** This idea has lots of possibilities. You could show the main sequence of events in the novel or choose one episode to show in more detail. You will need a long narrow piece of paper (your art teacher may be able to help). To create your frieze you could use paint, pastels, pencils, textas, crayons, coloured paper cut-outs – whatever you have available. A frieze can look great along a wall in the classroom or in a corridor. The librarian might want it for the library.
- **A mural:** Now here’s a challenge – Hell in the classroom. You will need a huge sheet of paper or many pieces arranged together, large brushes and lots of paint.
- **Making music:** Get a group of your friends together, find at least one with a drum, if possible, and write a rap song or a folk song the characters may have written to tell their story.
- **A collage:** Find old magazines, newspapers, fabrics, wool. Imagine the scene, and use any or all of these materials to recreate it. The graphics do not have to be realistic –they can be abstract or symbolic. Maybe your collage could illustrate a quote from the novel.
- **Something different:** Find a large sheet of white or brown paper, and paint or draw a huge explosion. Cover the whole page. Search your house and shed or garage for odds and ends, such as odd shapes or chunks of metal (not so heavy that they can’t stay on the page) and bits of wood. Stick them onto your explosion to create a graphic representation of the scene in Mrs Alexander’s garden when the mower blows up, or the scene where the bridge becomes an inferno.
- **Abstract artwork:** Reread question 13 in ‘Exploring the Text’. Create an abstract artwork in your preferred medium to try to capture the ‘threatening shadow’ that might overshadow your life – it could be an emotion, a situation, a person or even an attitude – in image form.
- **Creative writing:**
 - a. Write a scene where one of the characters in the book expresses romantic feelings for another character, but the feelings are not returned.
 - b. Write an episode from a story where a teenager is trapped in an Australian capital city by invading forces, and the teenager has to somehow manage to survive in the CBD without being detected.

- **Letter writing:**
 - a. Write a letter to one of the teenagers, from one of their parents, giving them advice on how to live their lives ‘in case we don’t survive this war and we never get to see and hug you again’.
 - b. Write a letter to the teenagers, from a military expert, suggesting three ways in which they can continue to evade the enemy and wage war successfully.
 - c. Write a letter to a parent from one of the teenagers in the book – a person who is scared that they will be killed during their guerrilla war campaign.
- **Poetry:** Write a poem based on the events in the book, beginning with the words ‘I used to think . . .’
- **Speech writing:** Write a speech for a politician in the country which has invaded Australia, justifying the invasion and the occupation of this country.
- **Finishing touch:** Write a page explanation of the scene you have chosen for this activity, indicating its significance in the novel, any changes to, or developments in, the characters, and the reasons for your choice.