

The Sea-Wreck Stranger

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Recommended for Secondary

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Synopsis

'Our sea-wreck stranger doesn't stand much of a chance, not on Dunnett Island...'

Ness, Ty and their cousin Sophie live in a small island community: a community that has turned its back on the sea, and on its own past.

When the arrival of a stranger forces all three to question the world they know—a world dominated by superstition, fear and loss—they each have a choice to make. Rebelling against the harsh austerity of her life, Ness chooses to follow the sea currents running in her blood. It proves a choice that risks everything—including her own life.

With its strong cast of characters, Anna Mackenzie's novel is a perceptive study of small societies and their often poisonous interpersonal relationships.

About the Author

Anna Mackenzie is a full-time writer and editor with a strong sense of place and a love of rugged landscapes. She lives on a farm in Hawke's Bay with her husband and two children, additionally enjoying the occasional presence of her various nineteen nieces and nephews. Anna says she can't remember a time when she didn't write, but it is only in the last five years that she has turned her attention to writing for children and young adults.

Her novels include *High Tide*, *Out on the Edge* and *The Sea-Wreck Stranger*. She has a degree in psychology from Victoria University and confesses a deep and abiding interest in people.

Author Statement

The opening chapters of *The Sea-Wreck Stranger* came to me as I watched a group of children rummaging amongst flotsam at the edge of a lake. What would happen, I asked myself, if children found something powerful, life-changing, challenging—something they had to keep secret. Something that would cause them to question the world they thought they knew.

The world I gave to Ness, Ty and Sophie is harsh and regimented. Their lives are proscribed by the decisions of their elders and the errors of the past. Despite this, they blossom into characters with strength and clarity. The relationship between them grows and changes as they each find their own path to independence. The idea at the heart of *The Sea-Wreck Stranger*—that the world of the future might be bleak rather than 'advanced'—is an idea I've always thought worth exploring. Ness' world is one option. Dev's is another. There are countless variations. One of the joys of writing is that you can explore potential as well as reality, merging and shuffling to suit. Another is that stories don't always take you where you expect to go.

Themes

- ALIENATION. The islanders have turned their backs on the sea and anything that comes from it. The characters also are often alienated from each other. The alienation comes from fear and leads to suspicion, malicious gossip and a readiness to condemn anyone who shows any individuality or is in any way different. Ness feels utterly alienated from the rest of the community. She says repeatedly that she doesn't belong on the island but, of course, she is frustrated by the impossibility of escaping.
- FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN. Anything or anyone from the outside, be they refugees, like the

stranger, or visitors, may bring disease or death. The islanders want to live totally in the present, to cut off all ties with tradition, with the ways of the past. They have Cleansing Days when anything from the past, including books, are burned. You will have a chance to discuss the effects of this mind-set. You will be able to consider if any of this kind of thinking is with us today in our daily life.

- **DISTRUST.** The book considers the effect of bitterness, suspicion and hostility on both the victims and the perpetrators.
- **MORAL INTEGRITY.** The characters are faced with the choice of doing what is right even if this may lead to punishment or even death.
- **CHOICE.** Everybody in the book has to make a choice and this choice will define their future. We are particularly involved with the choices that Ness makes. Of course choice involves taking risks, and the problem all the characters face is if it is worth leaving the comfort zone of their prejudices and superstitions or to go bravely into the unknown and thereby change their lives.
- **THE ENVIRONMENT.** The writer does not give us solutions to the problem of pollution of the sea but the danger is clearly spelled out for us.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1.

This chapter introduces us to the main characters in the book and the natural description sets the atmosphere. Read again the first paragraph. We all know days like this. What sort of mood does it evoke? How does the language influence our mood?

What is the first impression you get of Marn and Tilda? We gain a very vivid picture of Tilda through her body language and mannerisms, both here and later in the book. What is the explanation on page 3 for Tilda's green-plum sourness?

What are your first impressions of Sophie? Do you agree life would be better for her if she were less like a piece of tumbled driftwood?

Ness is the narrator. What does she reveal about herself? As you read the book, remember that we see the other characters only through Ness' eyes? Can we sometimes be influenced, rightly or wrongly, by her view of other people?

Why do the children need to go the sea? Why do you think this is forbidden?

Chapter 2

Using the information in the first paragraph draw a map of Skellap Bay.

Do you have a clearer picture here of why Ness is so drawn to the sea?

What is the purpose of the Cleansing Days. Can we ever really escape from our past? Is it necessarily a good thing to do? Why is it necessary to learn from our past?

Why do you think Colm and the Council are trying to force people to forget the past? Why are they persuading people that the sea is poisoned?

Ness believes that there is no need for fear of the sea beyond the hints it carries of a world beyond their shores. Ness suggests that the sea has brought death and loss but there is also the suggestion that the fear goes beyond the sea itself to anything that is different.

We haven't as yet been told about the sea danger. Why do you think that the people of Dunnett are afraid not only of the sea but of any kind of sea wreck?

The chapter ends on a tense note. The children have stumbled on an apparently dead man washed up on the beach.

Chapter 3

How does the author continue to build the tension in this chapter?

It would seem normal to be pleased that the man is alive, but the children find it distressing. Why? What is the difference between Sophie's and Ness' reaction? What more do we learn about Ness?

Why are there so many secrets on Dunnett?

Chapter 4

Describe in your own words what they do for the man?

Here we understand some of the reasons for the islanders' fear. Why has the sea become the enemy? What has Ness' father taught her about the sea and strangers?

Who is the leader amongst the children? How do we know this?

What do we learn about the man from his clothes?

Already a moral problem is arising. If they try to save the man, they will be disobeying their family and the Council and will be severely punished. There is also a strong probability that the man will die even with their help. What to do?

What are wind words? (p20) What examples of wind words have you found in yourself or amongst your friends or in the community—words showing irrational fears of migrants or refugees or people of a different race or colour?

Do you know the story of the Good Samaritan? A man had been beaten up and left to die by the road. Respectable people ignored him until a Samaritan, almost an outcast in society, rescued him and saved his life. This is Ness' situation. She can leave the stranger to die and save herself or try to save him and risk her life. She can also rationalise leaving him by persuading herself that he is going to die anyway.

Can you think of occasions when you rationalise your behaviour?

Chapter 5

Here are many examples of the way body language reveals someone's inner feelings. How is Tilda revealed? Make a list of the ways in which people reveal themselves through gestures and facial expressions.

Chapter 6

Here we find reasons for the fear of the sea? Do you think the Council was reasonable in its attitude?

Describe what Ness does for the stranger, whose name we now know as Devdan or Dev.

Chapter 7

We are introduced to Merryn who is to become an integral part of the book.

Why is Ness so angry when she discovers the state Dev is in?

Why is farming such an important part of the island?

What do we learn about Ness' determination from this chapter?

Chapter 8

Add Merryn to your list of characters. Why does Ness like her so much? How does she differ from Elsie?

At the end of the chapter, Ness says that sometimes a lie is easier than the truth. Give some examples from everyday life where this might be the case.

Chapter 9

Ness is faced with more personal problems. Marn suggests that a marriage should be arranged in the future between Ness and their neighbour, Jed. Ness is appalled and tells her father of Jed's attempted sexual assault on her the previous year. She is distressed further by her uncle's insensitive response to this. Again Ness feels trapped by her circumstances. She looks for someone to blame. Who do you blame when things go wrong?

Have you ever felt that there was no way out of a bad situation?

Try to imagine how Dev might help her to get away?

Marn says that Merryn would be wise to take a little more care of what folk think. Do you think our lives should be governed by what other people think?

Chapter 10

Why is Jed so intimidating?

How does Ness deal with him?

Chapter 11

Ness turns to Merryn for comfort but finds Colm intimidating her. It is a menacing chapter and the problems encountered are unresolved. In what ways has Ness helped Merryn more than Ness will ever know?

The word teck is used. What do you think it might mean?

There is a menacing story of a widow who got on the wrong side of Colm and was found dead two days later. The Council said she brought it upon herself. Is this a reasonable response? Can it ever be reasonable?

At the end of the chapter Dev is gone!

Chapter 12

Ness realises in this exciting and moving chapter that she has never given a thought to the life that Dev has left behind and she feels for the bleakness of his grief.

Discuss Merryn's statement '*that we must each find our own way to a place where the hurt is no larger than lets you get on with living.*' (p72)

Chapters 13 & 14

A terrible storm hits the island. It seems impossible that Dev will have survived in the cave and Ness almost dies when she goes out to look for the baby goat.

We see a different side of Marn here. What does this show about him? Can it be reconciled with the Marn we have seen so far?

Chapter 15

Marn's kindness continues and Ness can only see his saving her life as a means to ensure the arranged marriage will go ahead. Should she have jumped to that conclusion?

Chapter 16

The damage inflicted by the storm and the physical pain and exhaustion Ness has endured now mix with the intense grief that Ness feels at her conviction that Dev must have perished. She tells Sophie and Merryn of her fears about Jed.

It is Sophie's belief that Marn will change his mind. Do you believe this?

Chapter 17

Dev is found alive. We find he is an environmentalist. Ness is no longer as sure of Ty as she was in the past. She grows more frightened of Jed, who she finds is going to stay with her family for a few days. Give two reasons why this would disturb her.

Chapter 18

The village is eating itself up with suspicion. Suspicion is contagious and Ness suspects Marn of betrayal. She cannot tell Ty or Sophie that Dev is alive and tensions grow between them. She has no one to confide in and feels she is in a cart rolling down a slope.

Why is it important for everyone to have someone to confide in?

Chapter 19

We discover that teck stands for tecknowledgie. Why is it spelt this way?

Dev wants to talk to the Council. What does he want to tell them? Why does Ness feel they will never listen?

Dev sees the bans as a means of controlling the people through generating fear. Can you think of other examples in history or in the world today where governments use fear to control the people?

Only now are we being told what has caused the catastrophe in which the world finds itself. The causes may have been pandemics, environmental crises, wars. When communication fell down, civilizations lost touch and fell apart. Dunnett no longer wants links with the outside world.

Why is the Council so afraid of tecknowledgie, books, schools, learning?

Ness returns home, excited at the thought that she might be able to start fishing again when she is grabbed from behind.

Chapter 20

Again Ness manages to escape from Jed's seductive clutches. How does she talk her way out of the crisis? How does she feel?

Chapter 21

How does the self-serving attitude of the Council make it impossible for them to accept new ideas?

Why does Ness lie to Sophie?

Chapter 22

Jed, who is always a threat, has found Dev. Ness tells Sophie the truth in this thrilling chapter.

Why does Ness say that the villagers will blame Dev for the storm?

At the climax of the chapter, Colm stands in the doorway.

Chapter 23

As Sophie and Ness wonder what Colm has heard, a new brave Sophie appears. How has she changed?

How will Ness try to rescue Dev from the cave?

Chapter 24

Describe in your own words the hazardous ascent of the cliff.

Chapter 25

When Jed tells his father about Ness and the cave, Sophie rescues the situation. How does she do this?

What moral quandary is Ness left in?

Despite the fact that Sophie has saved the day, Ness regrets that Sophie has changed. Why is this?

What is the meaning of her dream on page 159?

Chapter 26

Ness realises several truths about herself and her future. What are they?

Chapter 27

Ness sets off with Marn. What happens that makes them turn back?

What has happened to the whole village? What creates this lynch-mob mentality that is baying for blood like hounds in a fox-hunt?

Chapter 28

The pace of the book quickens even more as Ness finds Dev. What makes her doubly sure that she too must escape the village and the island?

Chapter 29

What strategies does the author use to increase the tension still further in this chapter?

Chapter 30

The inlet at last. And moreover a boat. The sea that runs like a current in her blood will save them both. They are not safe until they pass away from the stones and rocks thrown at them and move into the open sea.

Read again the description of the sea on p196. What is the significance of the colour of the sea?

How does Ness feel when she sees Skellag Bay for the last time?

Nevertheless she has reached her right place.

'But as the sea lifts beneath our small craft and the wind catches in the sail—swelling it outwards like a pregnant cow's belly, like a bird's wing, like a promise—it is my father's blood that is running like a tide in my veins.'(p198)

Exploring language

1. Simile and metaphors

- Similes and metaphors are used to describe emotions. Illustrate one of these feelings using symbols:
- 'honey-sweet excitement' (p2)
- 'A shiver runs like ants up my spine' (p17)
- 'my heart beats like gull's wings in my chest' (p46)
Physical features are described with vivid natural imagery. Create a cartoon character with one (or all) of these features:
- 'legs as spindly as a heron's' (p7)
- Moving 'like an inside-out spider' (p11)
- A 'voice snakes across the yard' (p33)
- 'Grin as broad as a late pickle' (p50)
- 'fingers creeping like a bunch of fat worms' (p59)
Write your own similes and metaphors based on these animals: butterflies, monkey, fish, weta, shark, slug, cat.

2. Writing Style

- The story is told in the First Person. What effect might this have on the reader? How does it help the reader get inside the character?

- Rewrite the following passage in Third Person: 'His fingers crush my wrist, so that I feel the bones grate. My voice rises to a shriek. 'Stop!'... My arm feels like to break. I kick out hard, aiming for his injured leg. As my boot connects he cries out, falling back, and I'm free...' (p37)
- Does Third Person distance you from the character? Which style do you prefer?
- Is Ness a reliable narrator? Is she ever wrong in her judgements of people? (e.g. her opinions of Sophie (p3), and Marn (p89)).
- Action is conveyed effectively through verbs. For example, on page 79, the paragraph beginning: 'I've almost reached the top when I lose my footing...'. Identify the verbs in the passage. Why are they so important? Use the same verbs to write a different action sequence, of your own creation.

Creative responses

- The plot is open-ended when Ness and Dev sail away. Will they reach the mainland? What will they find? Write the next chapter of their adventure.
- How much do you rely on technology? Imagine a world without digital technology, electricity, plastics or modern transport. Write a diary of a typical day in your life without technological aids.
- Landscape is important in the story. Draw a map of the bay area (p. 11). Paint a picture of the landscape as you imagine it to be.
- Write a personal review of the book. Consider the following questions:
 1. What situations had a ring of truth for you?
 2. Which characters appealed to you the most? The least?
 3. How did the story make you feel as it unfolded?
 4. What awakened your imagination in the book?
 5. What did you dislike, or find boring?
 6. What did you think of the ending?

Genre

- What does the word 'apocalyptic' mean?
- What genre is this? Science fiction, fantasy, apocalyptic, realism?
- This is mostly a realistic story, with some futuristic elements. Describe the difference between these two main elements using examples from the book. What effects do they both have on you as a reader?
- The isolated island is a favourite setting for writers of the 'social fantasy' genre—it allows them to set up a 'mini' alternative world. Read *Riding Tycho* by Jan Mark. What are the similarities/differences between the two novels?
- Read *The Islanders* by John Rowe Townsend. What is the equivalent of the Council and the Bans?

Debate

- People will never learn to care for their planet until it is destroyed.
- It is human nature to be suspicious of anything or anyone different.

Essays

- Ness wins through because she is true to what she believes. Discuss
- People can't always see what's lying right in front of their noses,.....but as well, they see things that aren't there at all. How true is this of the people of Dunnett, including Ness?

Class Project

Working in groups organised by your teacher, do some research into :-

- causes of sea pollution today;
- specific results of this pollution;
- steps which have been taken to improve the situation;
- ideas of what individuals can do to slow down this pollution.