



# Cuz

## by Liz van der Laarse

### About the author:

Liz van der Laarse lives in the Far North and has taught in area and primary schools for many years.

She has had two middle fiction books published previously: *Trouble Patch* and *Not Even*. *Not Even* (a Notable NZ Children's and Young Adult Book in the Junior Fiction category, 2003) has been used as a class set by intermediate and junior secondary teachers. Between them the books have been reviewed by Jaberwocky, The Listener, Brat, Magpies and the NZ Herald.

### Synopsis of Novel:

This exciting novel of resilience, identity, loss and love, centres on two 14 year old cousins, River and Huia. Huia is from Riverton and is confident in her Maori heritage as her grandmother has taught her a great deal about who she is and her place in the world. This is in stark contrast to River, from the tiny West Coast settlement of Fox River, who with his blond dreads and absent Maori father knows little of his culture and is very aware of this when around Huia. During a remarkable survival ordeal they discover that they both have strengths to share and also that the land can give as well as take away.

Huia's father and River's uncle, Tau, is killed during an explosion on his fishing boat, and the cousins, who are accompanying Tau on this trip, are washed ashore on a rocky beach in Dusky Sound, one of the most isolated places in New Zealand. Initially their situation is dire. They only have the clothes they wear, winter is approaching and Huia is consumed by grief. Their only option is to attempt to walk east, through rugged high country and then finally climb the daunting Takitimu mountain ranges towards the nearest civilisation. Their survival is due to both Huia's intimate knowledge of bushcraft, edible plants in particular, and River's physical and mental toughness. During their ordeal, where they are taken to the very limits of endurance, they learn a great deal about themselves and form a very close bond.

They eventually emerge from the bush physically weaker, but emotionally stronger. River reconnects with his father, who came over from Australia to join in the fruitless search for the pair and seems keen to take over the family fishing business. River is now committed to build on the cultural knowledge he learnt from Huia while in the bush. Huia becomes a central figure in her supportive whanau and even though they all feel the loss of her much loved father the strength of this resilient whanau will carry them through.

### Themes / issues

There are several important themes relevant to teens in this novel. The main theme is the resilience of teen spirit and locating that inner strength we need



to overcome powerful obstacles. Another important theme is to do with identity and feeling comfortable in your own skin. River initially felt at a disadvantage with Huia due to her in-depth knowledge of her culture, but he discovered that he also had strength of spirit. This, combined with his desire to link closely with his Maori culture, will make him a powerful leader in the future. Other themes of note are dealing with the loss of a loved one and the importance of family. The novel teaches us not to become overwhelmed with loss but to honour the lost one by carrying on with courage. It also stresses that a cohesive family, encompassing the generations, is a powerful force for stability and success.

## Writing style

The novel is third person (limited) past tense narration in a straight linear progression of events. The author has a real affinity for the great outdoors and the language describing the more rugged setting is strong and sensory. Her use of powerful verbs and short sentences gives a dramatic and filmic quality to the narrative and propels it at a speed even the slowest readers will enjoy.

The dialogue between the teens is realistic and Huia's frequent use of Maori terms is likely to put many readers into River's shoes, as he too initially struggles to understand all she says. Advise students to only refer to the glossary at the back as a last resort, as the Te Reo Maori is all in context and, like River, they will quickly latch on to the meaning.

## Year level suitability and application

The identity and relationships aspects of the novel will work very well with Year 9 and 10 groups, although personal challenge/discovery themes will also be relevant to older students. The questions from the 2017 NCEA level 1 Written Text external exam work very well with this novel, particularly questions 5, 6 and 7.

## Curriculum links

Very direct links to junior Social Studies, Year 11 geography, Year 9 to 12 Te Reo Maori, P.E. / Outdoor Education / Health syllabus (Physical / mental health and wellbeing, personal identity / self-worth, safety and risk management, sensitivity and respect, relationships with other people, social attitudes and beliefs, interpersonal skills / personal growth through planning, executing and reflecting on a serious challenge)

# Learning opportunities

## Before reading: Setting the scene

Reading the cover for visual/verbal clues:

- Students work in pairs to study the verbal and visual clues given by front and back cover of the book. They make a set of predictions on plot, character and setting based on those clues alone.
- While doing this, students can also make a list of statements that identify how they are being 'positioned' by use of colour, contrast, images, layout, font style.

## Prior knowledge discussion / activities:

- Students share any personal experience they have of the settings from the novel and then either on a screen or physical atlas locate all the places mentioned.
- Get students to share any experiences they have of facing and overcoming challenges in the outdoors in other New Zealand settings.
- Class discussion on the 'cultural baggage' (ethnicity, family structure etc) we carry with us and how this influences how we think and relate to others.

**During reading:** Understanding the content – answers may be written or oral

### Chapter one:

1. What immediate impression do the action verbs in the first paragraph give you?
2. Why does River feel uneasy and a bit defensive around Huia?
3. How does the waiata singing reinforce this?

### Chapter two:

1. Give two possible examples of the author foreshadowing future problems.
2. Make a list of the Maori words you do not know from this chapter and give possible translations. When you have finished the book check glossary and make corrections as needed.

### Chapter three:

1. What caused the boat to explode?

2. How does River show skill and courage during their ordeal in the water?

#### **Chapter four:**

1. What unusual method do they use to keep warm?
2. Why is it unlikely a search party will be looking for them in the next few days?

#### **Chapter five:**

1. Why are River and Huia not able to eat any kaimoana?
2. What is the only immediate food they find and what is River's reaction?

#### **Chapter six:**

1. Describe River's tent making method.
2. In what ways do they both need each other at this critical point in their survival?

#### **Chapter seven:**

1. How do two plants prove very useful to them?
2. What realisation sinks them further into despair at the end of this chapter?

#### **Chapter eight:**

1. What do you understand by the term 'mauri'?
2. Give four new food sources Huia mentions.

#### **Chapter nine:**

1. Describe their fire making method?
2. Do a drawing of Huia's eel trap.

#### **Chapter ten:**

1. Write five instructions for catching a weka (but remember that they are a protected species!)
2. Describe their cooking method.

#### **Chapter eleven:**

1. In what ways does Huia feel that her ancestors are guiding her?
2. What word does River use that surprises Huia and what does it mean?

#### **Chapter twelve:**

1. Describe Huia's method for ensuring they head in the right direction.

2. How can you work out how to locate the points of the compass without using a compass or any other device?

#### **Chapter thirteen:**

1. Describe their eel cooking method.
2. What fish meal would you say is 'tumeke as'?

#### **Chapter fourteen:**

1. Describe how River catches weka number two

#### **Chapter fifteen:**

1. In what ways is the water disaster in this chapter similar to the one in chapter three?

#### **Chapter sixteen:**

1. What is the Hokitika Wild Food Festival?

#### **Chapter seventeen:**

1. Describe their latest food experiences.

#### **Chapter eighteen:**

1. Find and quote an appropriate metaphor for the wind in this chapter.
2. What courage do they both display in this very dangerous storm?

#### **Chapter nineteen:**

1. What is the purpose of the hut they find?
2. List five words that might describe their intense joy at this stage.

#### **Chapter twenty:**

1. Why do you think River has a dragging feeling when thinking about their homecoming?
2. List the ways they both helped each other survive.

#### **Chapter twenty-one:**

1. Why does Huia need to tell her whanau face to face about her father?
2. Find out the Te Reo Maori term for face to face.
3. What evidence is there in this chapter that, despite her ordeal, Huia is still alert to any opportunities to promote her culture.

#### **Chapter twenty-two:**

1. In what ways is the whare tupuna a representation of the body of an ancestor?

2. Comment on the similarities between this building and the shelters River built in the bush.

### Epilogue:

1. List the changes you can see in River now compared to River in the early chapters.
2. Write a list of twenty Maori words you may be able to introduce into your daily vocabulary.
3. Make a list of edible plants that you may be able to find in the nearest native bush to where you live.

## Post reading: Taking it further

### Theme analysis:

#### Activity one: Group work activity

Select two of the themes / issues listed earlier in these notes and get students to elaborate more on what the author may be commenting on and how she may be positioning them think about these issues. When considering the 'how' aspect students will need to closely consider character presentation.

A group spokesperson reports findings to the class.

#### Activity two: Individual work – NCEA level 1 Written text essay questions.

Attempt one of these questions from the 2017 level 1 Written Text external exam. Note that the first question works very well for this novel.

- Describe at least one challenge faced by a character in the written text. Explain how this challenge helped you understand the character.
- Describe at least one idea that changed your perspective or point of view in the written text. Explain how this idea changed your perspective.
- Describe a key moment in the written text that surprised or shocked you. Explain how this moment was important to the text as a whole.
- Describe a character that you disliked or admired in the written text. Explain how your feeling towards this character helped you understand the text as a whole.

#### Practical activity:

Individually or in groups make detailed maps of the areas mentioned in this novel. Trace the cousins' journey from

Dusky Sound to where you think they emerged from the bush and then the road journey from there to Riverton. On your map write or draw about major events that took place on the journey. (you will need a detailed map eg a Lands and Surveys map, or an older Heinemann NZ atlas)

**Role play activities:** (all role plays need to be handled with sensitivity and closely monitored by the teacher)

- Monologue – adopt the role of River or Huia and speaking in character explain your relationship with another character. Discuss how the relationship evolves
- Write and act out a TV or radio interview where River and/or Huia are asked about their ordeal in the bush.
- Monologue - Speaking as River or Huia one year in the future, ie at the unveiling for Tau, reflect on the events of a year ago and comment on how they have helped make you the person you are now.

#### Beyond the text activities:

- Write a proposal, to be taken to the Board of Trustees of your school, for an overnight class trip into an area of bush within reasonable driving distance of the school. Attempt to partially feed yourself from the bush, but ensure that you research the available edible plant life well beforehand, taking particular note of inedible berries! Do not cause damage to native flora or fauna.
- Also write a caregiver permission form. A small number of students could elect to sleep in a shelter they make themselves. Again, it is important not to cause undue damage to the environment during these activities. Use fallen branches for the support structures if possible.
- Design a poster or make a short film highlighting the survival steps necessary to survive for an extended period in the New Zealand bush.
- Individually or in groups make detailed maps of the areas mentioned in this novel. Trace the cousins' journey from Dusky Sound to where you think they emerged from the bush and then the road journey from there to Riverton. On your map write or draw about major events that took place on the journey.

*Denis Wright*