



Taking Off by Janice Marriott

A classroom English unit from  HarperCollinsPublishers

Taking Off is the new, finely-crafted junior fiction title from the pen of Janice Marriott, winner of the New Zealand Post Book Awards 2007 Junior Fiction Category with *Thor's Tale*. *Taking Off* is a sensitive novel about relationships as seen through the eyes of a 13-year-old girl and a 17-year-old boy. She is coming to grips with a serious eye problem and he is coping with a family break-up and the constant relocation imposed on him by his mother as she, too, struggles to rebuild her life. *Taking Off* is set in a small seaside community which is an important habitat for migratory seabirds. Observation of the wonder of bird flight and human flight is skillfully woven into the story, playing a major part in the exciting and tense climax. Young readers will easily identify with the true-to-life and vividly-drawn characters, and its fast pace will make it very hard to put down.

Story synopsis

Alana Shaw is worried about the deteriorating clarity of her vision and lives with the fear that it is a problem she has inherited from her famous record-producer father who has lost his sight. Will it have the same consequences for her? She is dreading her eye specialist appointment in Wellington, and has become a little difficult to live with. Alana's uncle Brad and her cousin are both pilots who run a small plane charter business, and she has always wanted to be able to fly a plane — that is, if she can pass the vision test.

Alana, her younger brother Toby, and their father's guide dog spend many happy hours watching and analysing the flight patterns of the richly diverse seabird life in the estuary of their small seaside town. One day she meets newcomer Tommy, and rescues him from an attack by a giant swan. Tommy and his mother have shifted from town to town trying to cope with their family break-up. Tommy is coping better than his mother, but is obsessed with his father and writes imaginary letters to him in a daily diary. Through Alana, Tommy begins to gain respect for the bird life, cares for sick birds and even decides to build a flying machine himself. During an estuary excursion, Tommy asks Alana to stop and tell him about some birds. Guide dog Custard doesn't stop, and is run over and seriously injured. Alana blames Tommy. Amira, a young refugee girl, is a new arrival and Alana's teacher asks her to take her under her wing. This further increasing the pressure on Alana.

Uncle Brad flies Alana to her eye appointment where she learns the worst — she will gradually go blind. On the flight home, Brad suffers a heart attack and Alana, aided by the control tower and another plane, calls upon all her knowledge of flight to courageously and successfully land the plane at Ohakea. Alana becomes a local celebrity. The story concludes four years later when Alana, inspired by Amira, comes back from studying languages at boarding school and plans a career as a language teacher. She finds that Tommy, Amira and the locals have gained sanctuary status for the estuary which is highly regarded internationally as a haven for sea and wading birds. Although she has little sight left, Alana has come to terms with her problem and is happy for other people to become her eyes.

Teaching and learning activities

- Discuss and identify the five senses. What sense do students rate as the most important and why? How would they cope if they lost the use of one of their senses? Which sense would they least want to lose? Do they know of anyone who is blind or deaf? How do they cope with everyday situations?
- Have students conduct 'Google' research on Alana's eye disease — retinitis pigmentosa. What forms does it take? What causes it? Can it be cured or slowed down?
- Find out what students' current knowledge is about flight. In groups, have students brainstorm and present an oral report to answer the questions:
 - How do birds fly? – How do planes fly?
- Type in 'how do birds fly for kids' and 'how do planes fly for kids' into Google. Have groups conduct research and improve and update their previous oral reports. Two good sites are:
<http://wings.avkids.com/Book/Animals/intermediate/birds-01.html>
www.planemath.com/activities/pmenterprises/forces/forces1.html
- Involve students in organizing and running a kite day at school, where students make and fly their own bird kites. Include a paper plane challenge for distance travelled and time in the air.
- As students read the story, have them note down the names of all the birds found at the estuary. Have each student conduct research on their favourite bird for class presentation and a wall display. Use library books or type in New Zealand Birds into the search box of the Encyclopaedia of New Zealand at: www.teara.govt.nz/ (for pictures and information).
- Construct bird masks and have students compose and present their own 'bird dance' mime or movement sequence.
- If possible, arrange a field trip to the nearest estuary to the school for bird observation and identification. If that is not possible, identify and count the number of birds found in the school grounds. A visit to www.whatbird.co.nz will aid identification, and students can listen to an audio of bird calls. Find out from your local garden centre what to plant to attract more native birds to the school grounds.
- Discuss Alana and Tommy's use of the personal diaries. Why did the author put these entries in the story rather than just saying how Alana and Tommy felt? How did it improve the story?

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