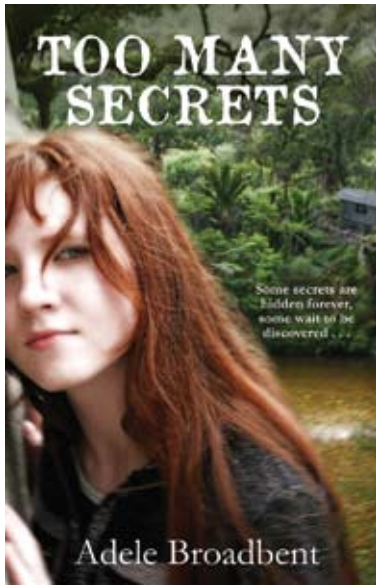


TOO MANY SECRETS by Adele Broadbent



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Although Hawkes Bay-based author Adele Broadbent has been writing for the New Zealand *School Journal* for many years and produced junior chapter books for overseas schools, *Too Many Secrets* is her first full-length novel. Destined to become a firm favourite with readers in the 8–14-year age group, *Too Many Secrets* brilliantly captures the city/country divide as seen through the eyes of the two main characters, Becs and Isaiah. Becs is the city girl, a 12-year-old shopping mall-savvy drama queen, and Isaiah is the introverted country boy who lives in the bush and has run away from his dysfunctional family. They are so distinctly different in temperament, life experience and ambition that it is hard to see how they can develop a rapport and respect for each other, and yet that is exactly what they do. Adele Broadbent has expertly woven the interaction of this unlikely pair together in such a way as to capture the minds and hearts of young readers in a non-stop, intriguing and moving adventure that cleverly builds in intensity until the last page. Supported by a cast of equally strong characters, *Too Many Secrets* is the perfect example of how a strong plot and cleverly drawn character development can be skilfully combined into a novel of substance that will simply delight young readers.

Story synopsis

Becs is horrified when her mum, new stepfather Mark Burgess and step-sister Nick move out to the country to 'do up' the old Herrick mansion for on-selling and even more horrified at living in a bush shack with a long drop, terrifying insects, frightening birds, total silence at night, no cellphone coverage and no girlfriends. Only the promise of the future sale funding her boarding school fees keeps her going. She discovers Isaiah Herrick, a boy of her own age, living rough in a tree hut. He has run away from his family and often brutal father who all previously lived in the shack. Becs promises to keep his existence secret. During restoration work, the pictures of Isaiah's great-grandparents are discovered. Mrs Herrick is wearing an expensive necklace. Mark discovers that Mrs Herrick ran off with another man, triggering a drunken gambling spree that ruined her now mentally ill husband, Joshua Herrick. He closed the house down. They discover Isaiah's father had intended to restore the mansion but became obsessed with the evil he believed it contained and again it was closed it up until he sold it to Becs' family. Becs and Isaiah continue to secretly meet and he reveals the wonders of the bush to Becs while she tells him about city life. Isaiah is now living in a shed belonging to an old recluse named Oscar. Becs convinces him to secretly live in one of the cleaned-out sheds at the mansion where she can easily bring him food. Mark discovers a dangerous gin trap in the bush he believes belongs to Oscar and, accompanied by Becs, he visits his house to remonstrate with him. They discover Oscar has cut his leg severely and take him to the doctor in town. Isaiah feels guilty for leaving and finds his way into town to visit Oscar. When Becs' family visit Oscar in hospital, they discover a frightened and distraught Isaiah struggling with the doctor and Becs is forced to come clean about Isaiah. CYF is informed and until a relative is found, Isaiah lives with Becs' family. Becs and Isaiah discover the skeletons of Mrs Herrick (still wearing her necklace) and her man friend in the mansion and realise that Joshua Herrick murdered them. More secrets are revealed including the fact that Isaiah's father was a lawyer recovering from a nervous breakdown when he too discovered the skeletons and suffered a relapse, which accounted for his strange behaviour towards his family. Oscar confesses to being Isaiah's great-uncle and they discover that the mansion has been left in trust to Isaiah. Unfortunately Isaiah's then mentally ill father had illegally sold it to Becs' family. Isaiah's mother is located by the authorities and she and Isaiah gift the precious necklace to the Burgess family to compensate for their financial loss. Becs' family decide to stay on to help Isaiah restore the house and even Becs is pleased to forgo city living for another year as she has developed an appreciation of country and bush life.

Motivational and pre-reading activities

- Through discussion, have students compare a city lifestyle for their age group with the lifestyle of someone living in a remote country area surrounded by bush. Brainstorm and list differences. Have all students contribute to a *Pros and cons* wall chart of each lifestyle.
- Introduce Becs, the main character of the novel, as a 'drama queen'. Have they ever heard this expression? What is a drama queen? What major adjustments to her lifestyle would Becs, a 12-year-old girl who hangs around shopping malls in the city with her friends, have to make when she goes to live in such a remote place?
- Tell students that when she arrives, she meets Isaiah, a runaway boy of similar age to Becs who is living by himself in the bush. What would he eat and drink? Do they think it is possible to live and survive in the bush? How would he feed himself? Have students speculate on why Isaiah would run away from his family.

During and post-reading activities

- Discuss Becs' 'drama queen' outburst (pp 26–27) directed at her mother when she first arrives at the shack. Do students think she was justified in acting this way? Why was Ascot so important to her? Have students contrast this with her attitude at the end of the book. What had happened to Becs to bring about this major change?
- Have students keep a brief summary of each encounter between Becs and Isaiah. Have them list what Becs and Isaiah learn about each other, and from each other, that strengthens their relationship, and what in particular changed Becs' attitude to living in 'the sticks'.
- Highlight the way that the author uses both Isaiah and Becs to tell parts of the story through their eyes. Can students say how the story would change if only Becs or Isaiah were telling the story themselves? How does this storytelling device help us get a better understanding of the two main characters?
- Brainstorm and list the secrets that were brought out into the open during the story. Discuss the idea of secrets in everyday life. Can students give any examples of times when it is best to keep a secret and examples of when secrets are best brought out into the open?
- On the final page of the novel, Becs says she has found a new 'normal'. Can the students explain what she means? Have them devise a contrasting 'Old normal' and 'New normal' table for both Becs and Isaiah that clearly shows how their normals have changed.
- In groups, have students prepare and enact a drama or radio play of an exciting or interesting part of the story that appeals.