

SMILING JACK by KEN CATRAN



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Ken Catran has written over 50 novels and has been highly awarded for his young adult fiction. In 2007, he received the Margaret Mahey Award for services to children's literature. His internationally published books cover a wide range of genres, including science fiction, thrillers, history and war history. *Smiling Jack* is truly a thriller: from the first sentence readers are drawn into this fast-paced story, set in contemporary times in a rural New Zealand town. Robert returns home from the city and his world crumbles as accidental deaths look more and more like murders, in which he is implicated. The local people turn against Robert when it seems that his late father has embezzled their money through his law practice. As Robert tries to find out who is behind the murders, we meet an interesting cast of characters, and the number of likely suspects grows and changes as the story unfolds. At different stages in the story the reader will be convinced that they have figured out who Smiling Jack is, but they will be totally wrong. This novel has more twists and turns than a roller coaster, and an ending that leaves you gasping. The story contains graphic descriptions of death and some adult themes, so discretion is advised for students under twelve years of age.

Story synopsis

Robert returns to the rural town of Tucker to visit his widowed, lawyer father. He is awaiting his father's return, to lecture him again for leaving school to become a baristo, when Senior Sergeant Pegeen Connor arrives with news that his father and uncle's vehicle has gone into a flooded river. The Sarge has known Robert all his life as he had scrapes with the law, but he has always found her fair and encouraging. When Senior Sergeant takes Robert to the accident scene, he finds a playing card — a Jack with a manic smile drawn on it. Only Uncle Harry's body is found. At the funeral, Robert encounters his cousin, Susan, and Nicole, an American gap student. Susan hated her father, and the cousins dislike each other. Robert meets with Judith Carne, the family lawyer, who tells him that trust funds are missing. Robert finds a note leading him to a gold coin dealer, from whom his father has purchased over \$3 million worth of coins, with embezzled money. There are two more 'accidental' deaths, Aunt Janice and Elias Longbottom, each with a Smiling Jack left. Robert is summoned to Bertram Baydon, High Aten of the Atenist cult, who tells Robert that his father revealed the hiding place of the gold in a fable. Robert and Nicole's friendship grows and she suggests they enlist Susan's help to find the gold. Lauren, a young Aten girl, is murdered at The Tub; again a Smiling Jack card is found. Lauren was to tell Robert what she had overheard Robert's father say about the gold. Robert unravels the fable and tells Nicole the gold is hidden in The Tub. Miss Wainwright, his father's secretary, is also found dead with a Smiling Jack. Her body is found when Robert and Constable Barry Dickerson both arrive at Hillarton House. Robert flees the scene. When Susan doesn't show at The Tub, Robert dives and finds Susan's body. The grill-like cover over The Tub has been locked. Robert tries to find a way out and does so through the Aten Temple of the dead. Police divers find the gold coins, but not Susan's body; just a Smiling Jack card. Robert is implicated in her death. When Robert receives a call from 'his father' to meet at Hag Rock, above The Tub, Nicole insists on coming. She is hit on the head, by a disguised Constable Dickerson, Robert slips over the edge at Hag Rock, Sarge pulls him to safety as Nicole charges screaming hatefully, then she falls hundreds of metres onto the cover of The Tub. Sarge explains that Barry and Nicole were going to split the gold, Nicole was Robert's twin sister, their mother had an affair with Robert's father. Nicole's computer reveals her plan was for Robert to be accused of the murders as revenge for his privileged upbringing. She and Susan caused the accident to kill Robert's father and uncle, then killed Miss Wainwright (Elias was killed to divert suspicion). Then Nicole killed Susan. And who is Robert's mother? Senior Sergeant Pegeen Connor — the new partner in his cafe.

Motivational and pre-reading activities

- What do students understand by the terms 'whodunnit' and 'thriller'? Can they say what type of books fit these terms? Have they read any murder mysteries? If so, have they been tempted to turn to the end of the book to find out 'whodunnit'? Survey class and family members to find if this is a common practice. Why would a reader want to know the ending before reading the entire story? List advantages and disadvantages.
- Nicole, one of the characters, is on a gap year. Do students know about the Gap Year Scheme? Which countries would they like to spend a year in on leaving school and why? What challenges would living in a new country present?
- In the story, readers will encounter the Aten Cult. The Atenists, who live near the town of Tucker, believe in an Ancient Egyptian god. Have students carry out online research to learn about Aten. Go to: www.touregypt.net/aten.htm
- Introduce the idea that it is common for leaders of a cult to try to control the thoughts, behaviours, emotions and information of people who belong to their cult. Discuss what this means. Why do they think that it could be dangerous to join a cult?

During and post-reading activities

- Were students puzzled that neither Robert nor Susan seemed to demonstrate any great sadness or grief when their fathers were killed? What words could be used to describe their reactions?
- In a fast-paced murder mystery, how important do students think the development of character is, compared to that of plot?
- Would the story be less exciting if the money Robert's father embezzled was not converted into gold coins? Is the idea of gold treasure an important element in the book?
- Have students sketch out the series of steps to show how Robert solved the 'fable'. What clues did he have and who helped him to find where the gold was hidden?
- Was the ending a complete surprise? Who had students considered as the likely 'Smiling Jack' and why? Were there different suspects at different stages of the book?
- Are there any clues during the story that reveal Senior Sergeant Pegeen Connor's fondness for Robert? Did her revelation at the end provide sufficient explanation for her behaviour towards him?
- While the story is set in New Zealand — clues such as Christchurch and gorse — could students imagine that this novel could be set in other English-speaking countries with very few changes?