



The Secret of Spirits Bay by Stephen Barker

A classroom English unit from



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The Secret of Spirits Bay is the first book by Stephen Barker. This delightful, powerful and moving piece of children's literature skillfully draws on and unites aspects of the past with events in the present, as seen through the eyes of a young teenage boy. It makes strong connections with our colonial past and the early interaction between Māori and European culture, and applies this to a contemporary setting where Tom, the central character, is himself a recent arrival from England. Readers will be enthralled as they are taken on an exciting and fast-moving journey that shifts effortlessly between the past and the present — a journey which celebrates friendship and respects cultural and personal differences. Students will easily identify with and react to the vividly drawn characters of this compelling adventure mystery.

Story synopsis

Tom is a young English boy who has come to live in New Zealand with his father who is the new local GP. His sister and mother will arrive from England in time for Christmas. Tom is gradually making friends at school, and is also coming to terms with this beautiful and completely new environment. As a keen runner, Tom spends much of his free time enjoying and exploring the sandhills and beaches around Spirits Bay. While running, he comes upon a young girl called Ana, who is assisting a boy called Jake out of the surf. He has been stung by a poison sting-ray barb and needs immediate help. Together, Ana and Tom help Jake to a nearby house where Mata — an old Māori kaumatua lives — and they clean up Jake's wound.

This is the start of a growing friendship between Mata, Tom, Ana and Jake. Tom visits Mata frequently and learns more about the Māori and early European history of the area, and about the whareniui that Mata is restoring. During a run to Mata's house, Tom believes he sees a boy of about the same age as him, running in front of him. In spite of his best efforts, Tom is unable to catch up with the boy who disappears without a trace. In time he learns that the boy he sees is the spirit of a cabin boy, also named Tom, who arrived in the area on one of the first European ships.

We learn more about cabin boy Tom and the huge earthquake that caused giant waves to swamp and kill the crew of the anchored ship as they tried to escape to land. Legend has it that a beautiful and magical sceptre belonging to a Māori lady passenger is still somewhere under the sea in a chest containing treasure. The mysterious spirit boy again appears and tries to warn Tom about an impending disaster in the Bay. Tom runs to warn Mata who is at the low-lying marae, and with a superhuman effort Tom manages to get Mata to higher ground just as a massive tidal wave hits Spirits Bay. Old Mata sadly dies from exhaustion. Tom later discovers the washed-up chest, and a parting gift of a ring from Mata explains the way that he is linked, in history, to the spirit of Tom, the cabin boy. The scene is set for further adventure with the mystery of the sceptre and treasure to be explored.

Teaching and learning activities

- Introduce Tom, the main character, as a boy from England who has just arrived in the area. In groups, have students list the problems and difficulties that any young person new to a district might face. Have any students faced something similar? Would it be even more difficult coming from another country? Discuss.
- Have students look at the glossary of Māori words at the conclusion of the book. Are there any words that they are not familiar with? Discuss reasons why the author has included this glossary in the book, *eg for readers not familiar with Māori words and useage — particularly overseas readers.*
- Re-read the section in chapter five where Mata tells the story of his ancestors and Ruaumoko's curse. Why was the area declared tapu? Make contact with local kaumatua to find out if there is anywhere in your district that is regarded as tapu and the reason/s it was declared tapu. Find out if there are any Māori legends relating to your district such as a local Taniwha or a famous battle. Write about them for a wall story.
- Find out what students know about tsunamis. What causes them? What are their effects? Have students conduct tsunami research on Google and report back. What precautions can we take in the event of a tsunami warning? What caused the tsunami at Sprits Bay? Visit: www.whatstheplanstan.govt.nz > select tsunami and learn precautions before, during and after.
- Re-read the description of the sceptre. From the description given, have students either paint or create their own sceptre. Speculate on any problems the sceptre may cause Tom in a future adventure.
- Tell students that the voyage by early settlers to New Zealand took about 120 days on cramped sailing ships and could often be very dangerous and uncomfortable for passengers. Can they find any reasons why people would be prepared to make such a voyage? Have students find out how long it now takes to fly from London to Auckland.
- Discuss the subplot of the proposed subdivision at Wairua Bay. For what reasons did Tom, Ana, Jake and other local residents oppose the subdivision? How would the area have changed if the subdivision had gone ahead?
- To encourage other students to read the book, have students write a 'teaser' flow-chart of the exciting adventures that take place in chronological order, and/or write short thumbnail sketches of various characters readers will meet in the story.

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