

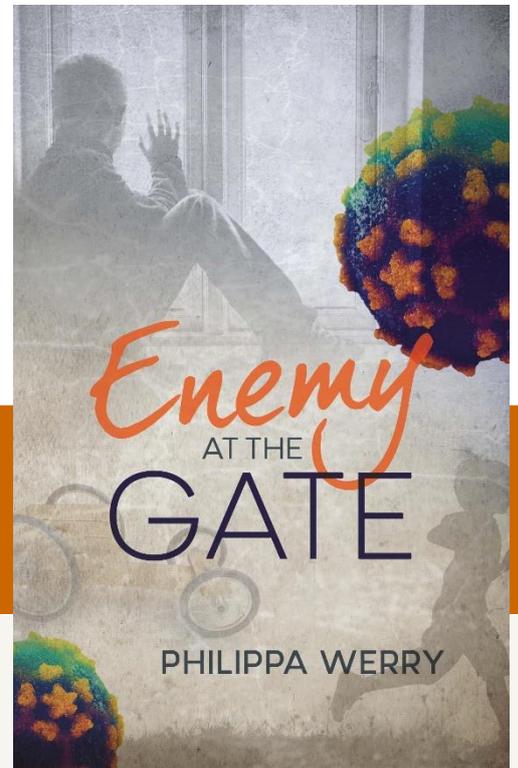
# Enemy at the Gate

By Philippa Werry



Curriculum strands:

Reading / writing / social studies / history / research



## Synopsis

A deadly disease is sweeping the world and nobody knows how to stop it. Movie theatres and swimming pools are shut and schools are closed. People are discouraged from gathering in large groups at the beach. Twelve-year-old Tom Mitchell can't even see his best friend Charlie. He wonders when the lockdown is ever going to end. And then things get worse.

It might all sound familiar. But this is New Zealand in 1937-38. The disease is infantile paralysis, or polio, and nobody knows where it will strike next. When even the adults are afraid, Tom finds refuge in his dream – to run in the Olympics like his hero, Olympic champion Jack Lovelock.

## About the Author

Philippa Werry was born in Christchurch and grew up in Wellington, Auckland and New Plymouth. From age six, she wrote stories and poems for the Children's Page that appeared every Saturday in the Evening Post newspaper. She now writes fiction, non-fiction and plays for children and young adults on many different topics. She finds history particularly fascinating and her interest has produced titles such as *The Telegram*, *Anzac Day*, *Lighthouse Family*, *Armistice Day*, *The New Zealand Wars*, *Antarctic Journeys* and *Our Incredible Dogs*. Philippa lives in Wellington with her husband and children. <http://www.philippawerry.co.nz/>

## Writing Style

*Enemy at the Gate* is a historical novel set in Lyall Bay, Wellington in 1936-37. The text is written in the first-person past tense. The main character is 12-year-old Tom Mitchell, and other important characters include his parents, older sister Lily, younger brother Johnny and younger sisters Tilly and Jessie, his best friend Charlie and Charlie's family, his teacher Mr Moffat (a WW1 veteran) and other friends, classmates and neighbours.

*Enemy at the Gate* has been written for the 10-12+ age group, helping students to understand what life was like in the Depression era, still overshadowed by WW1 and with WW2 looming, and in the middle of a frightening epidemic. At the back of the book, there is a historical note about the 1930s in New Zealand, as well as more information about the polio outbreaks and epidemics through the early twentieth century. On pages 299-303 there are photographs from the time and excerpts from newspaper articles.

## Themes

Pandemics

Friendships

Resilience

Family

Courage

New Zealand social history

## The Story behind the Book

The initial idea for *Enemy at the Gate* came from a story told by my father-in-law, Peter Werry. As a child, he lived with his family in Ashburton, where his father was a teacher. When polio broke out, his parents decided that the safest place for Peter and his brother John would be staying with relatives who had a sheep station at Waikononi, two hours' drive away in the Peel Forest.

Even today, the Peel Forest is quite an isolated place. Back then, it must have been even more so. Peter, John and their mother stayed on the farm, while their father went back to work, but they didn't stay in the farmhouse. They spent three months camping in a tent in a field, not seeing anybody except their relatives and one other family who came with them.

I think the boys quite enjoyed the experience, although it must have been very cold. I don't suppose their mother enjoyed having to sleep in a tent and cook over a primus for three months, but she must have thought it was worth it. In those days, no one knew what caused polio, or how to avoid catching it. There was no cure and parents were terrified that their children would end up sick, paralysed or at worst dead.

## For Class Discussion

- Look at the front and back covers. What do the images on the front suggest to you? What do you learn from the text on the back?
- Based on the title and the information on the covers, what do you think this story is about? Who is the main character?
- What clues help you realise that the story is set in the past? How do you know exactly when it is set? (p. 29)
- What do you learn about Tom's family from the first chapter? what do you learn about Charlie's family? (pp.1-15)

- “That was women’s work. It’s what women did”. What kind of things does Tom think are “women’s work”? What might Lily think about that? What do you think? (pp.13)
- When does Tom first get a sense that there is something his parents are worried about? Does he think it’s a problem? Why or why not? (pp.14-15)
- Why does Tom secretly borrow his dad’s watch? What is he trying to do? (p.17-22)
- What is it that Tom likes about running? Who was Jack Lovelock and why was he famous? (pp.21, 35, 47-48)
- Why does Tom’s father want Aunt Edie and her family to come and stay? Does Tom’s mother agree with his suggestion? Why or why not? (pp. 26-29)
- What do Tom and his school friends know about infantile paralysis? (pp. 31-34)
- Why do the schools close early for the summer holidays? (pp. 42-43)
- Apart from schools closing, how does the polio outbreak first affect Tom and his friends? (pp. 52-57, 77-79, 81)
- Draw a family tree of Tom’s family. Draw one of Charlie’s family.
- How is Tom’s cousin Meg similar to his sisters and how is she different? (pp. 90-96)
- What does “quarantine” mean? Where does the title of the book come from? (pg 131-132)
- How does Tom know that Flo isn’t feeling well? (pg 119-120) How does her father call the doctor? What does the doctor say? (pg 122-124)
- How does Dr MacPherson explain what infantile paralysis is? (pg 142-145). Why are some children nervous about having Tom and Johnny back at school? How does Mr Moffat solve the problem? (pp. 159-163)
- When schools close again, how are the students meant to do their schoolwork? (pp. 174-176) What does Tom think about doing lessons at home? (pp. 180-192)
- What is the significance of Coronation Day, and how do people celebrate it? (pp. 205-210)
- Why does Mr Moffat want to give Tom and Ellen Boyle extra arithmetic (maths) lessons? What is Tom’s initial reaction, and why? (pp. 217-219) How do the lessons change his attitude towards Ellen? (pp. 234-236)
- Why does Aunt Edie’s letter make Tom feel better? (pp. 224-225) Who is Amelia Earhart, what happens to her and how does that make Lily feel? (pp. 225-226)
- What is life like for Flo in hospital? (pp. 228-231) What happens on Flo’s first visit home? How does Tom feel when he sees her? What does Flo bring to show him? (pp. 237-242)
- Who comes to visit Flo? (pp. 244-248) What is the Kenny treatment (pp. 249-251) When does Flo come home for good? (p. 252) Why does Tom say it was “like having a stranger in the house”? (p. 255)
- What happens to Charlie and his family? (pp. 271-272) Why does Tom think Charlie has come back? How does he know he and Charlie are still mates? (pp. 279-281) How does Trevor surprise him? (p. 284) How does Ellen surprise him? (p. 285)
- How does Flo feel at the end of the book? How does Tom feel? (p. 286)

## ACTIVITY ONE: FAMILY TREE

Discuss with your students about family trees. Get the students to draw a family tree of their own family members including great-grandparents, right down to themselves. They can put the names in a traditional family tree design or design it themselves.

## ACTIVITY TWO: LIFE HISTORY

Write down in order the main events of Tom's life, up to the end of the book. Write down in order the main events of your own life. Write a paragraph about how Tom's character develops and changes throughout the course of the book.

## ACTIVITY THREE: INTERVIEW A CHARACTER

Choose a favourite character from the book and write down what you know about them. Draw up a list of questions that you would like to ask them. Exchange lists with another class member and try to answer some of the questions.

## ACTIVITY FOUR: RESEARCH

Find out more about polio. What is polio (or infantile paralysis, or it used to be called)? Why were people so scared of catching it? What happened in a polio epidemic? Does polio still exist anywhere in the world today? Ask older friends or relatives what they know about polio. If you ask anyone older than about 70, they might remember the polio epidemics or seeing people who had polio.

## ACTIVITY FIVE: COMPARE AND CONTRAST

- a) Choose an aspect of the polio epidemic, or any other epidemic (like influenza or Covid-19) and conduct a research assignment about it. Present your information as an essay, on a poster or in an oral presentation.
- b) Draw 2 columns on a piece of A4 paper. Label one "1936-37" and the other this year. Include in the first list things about Tom's life in 1936-37, and compare them with your life today.

## ACTIVITY SIX: LETTERS

Write a letter from Tom to Charlie, or Charlie to Tom, while Charlie and his sister are staying at the farm OR Write a letter from Tom to Flo, or Flo to Tom, while Flo is in hospital OR Write a letter from Flo to Molly, or Molly to Flo, when Flo has gone home but Molly is still in hospital.

## ACTIVITY SEVEN: REAL LIFE CHARACTERS

At the back of the book, you'll find some information about real-life characters in the story. They include royalty, two aviators, a child film star, a Canadian family of quintuplets, a runner, a nurse, and even a dog. There is also a section on famous people who had polio. Which of these are you most interested in? See if you can find out more about them.

## ACTIVITY EIGHT: BOOK REVIEW

Write a book review for *Enemy at the Gate*. Include information about what kind of book it is and what it is about. Describe the setting of the story and explain why it is important. Write about Tom and Flo and the challenges that they face. Remember to include your personal opinion about the novel.

## ACTIVITY NINE: POSTER OR STATIC IMAGE

Design a poster or static image advertising the novel for your school library. Remember to combine verbal and visual features to convey your ideas. Include illustrations and images from the text to make your poster appealing and encourage others to read the book.

## ACTIVITY TEN: PHOTOGRAPHS AND NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

a) Enlarge and print out the photographs and newspaper articles at the back of the book (some you can find online). Put the students into pairs or groups and given them one of the images, without any caption. Ask the students to discuss these questions:

1. How would you describe this picture (or article) to someone? What is happening, and where is it set?
2. What do you see that makes you say that?
3. Why was it included in the book?

Show the students the original caption and ask them if that changes their ideas about the image.

b) Do a search for images under keywords (eg polio, poliomyelitis, infantile paralysis) on the Digital NZ website (<https://digitalnz.org/>)

c) Do a search for newspaper articles under keywords (eg polio, poliomyelitis, infantile paralysis) on the Papers Past website (<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/>). If you want, you can limit the search to newspapers from your area.