

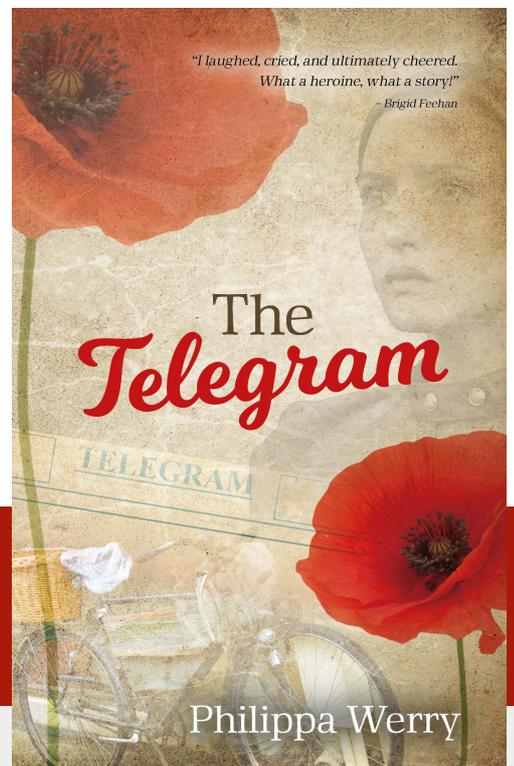
The Telegram

by Philippa Werry



Curriculum strands:

Reading / writing / social studies / history / research



Synopsis

Fourteen-year-old Beatrice Thomas lives with her widowed mother and younger sister Tilly in a small country town overshadowed by the events of World War One. As a telegram girl, it's her job to cycle around town delivering telegrams to people's front doors, and often the telegrams contain the worst of all possible news for the families of soldiers who have gone away to war. Rumours of peace start to spread, but Beaty's work continues all through the Armistice, the peace celebrations and the dreadful influenza epidemic. At the same time, she's writing to her friend and neighbour Caleb, somewhere on the Western Front - until his letters stop arriving.

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 *Enemy at the Gate*, *Anzac Day*, *Lighthouse Family*, *Armistice Day*, *The New Zealand Wars* and *Antarctic Journeys*. Philippa lives in Wellington with her husband and children.

<http://www.philippawerry.co.nz/>; <https://ww100.govt.nz/the-telegram>

Writing Style

The Telegram is a historical novel set during World War One in a small New Zealand town. The text is written in the first-person past tense. The main character is 14-year-old Beatrice Thomas, and other important characters include her mother, younger sister Tilly, neighbours Hannah and Daniel, and her boss and workmates at the Post and Telegraph Office. Hannah's brother Caleb is away at war and he and Beatrice communicate by letter. Other people in the town – such as teacher, mayor, Sunday school teacher, choir master - also play significant roles.

The Telegram has been written for the 10-12+ age group, helping students to understand what life was like for those at home when many of the men of the community had left to fight in the war. At the back of the book, there is a historical note about the role of women in war time, the armistice and the influenza epidemic, as well as more information about Morse code. There is also a biography of the author. On pages 279-281 there are photographs from the time and excerpts from newspaper articles and advertisements.

Themes

Friendship

Family

Courage

Resilience

Life at home in wartime

Writing Style

- 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?
- How do you know the story is set in World War One (once called the Great War)? (pg 6)
- Who goes past as Beatrice and Beth are walking home from school? Why are they worried? How does Beatrice know that Beth and her mother have received bad news? (pp.8-10)
- Why does Beatrice know something is wrong when she gets home? Who is in Beatrice's family? (pp. 11-13)
- "This time I knew there was only one answer." What is the problem? What does Beatrice think is the only solution? (p.13)
- What does a telegram message boy (or girl) do? How much did they get paid? Why did people send telegrams? (pp.15-17)
- "These days there was another reason why the telegram boy came to your door." What is that reason? How is it connected with the place names and categories in the paper? (pp. 17-18)
- What else do you learn about Beatrice during her job interview? (pp. 22-27)
- Why are Caleb and Beatrice writing to each other? (pp. 29-31) Why did Caleb want to sign up and go off to war? (pp.35-37)
- What happens on Beatrice's first day at work? (pp. 40-45)
- What other jobs did people have in the Post and Telegraph Office? (pp. 49-50)
- Draw a family tree of Beatrice's family. Draw one of Hannah and Caleb's family.
- Describe Beatrice's first day delivering telegrams. What does she learn about Barnaby? (pp. 58-63)
- Why does Beatrice compare Mrs Sutherland's face to a breeze running over a river? (p. 77) Why does she remember the Bible story about the leper? (p. 79)

- How does a Morse key work? Why does Beatrice want to learn Morse? (pp. 102-107)
- Why does Miss Taylor want to lend Beatrice books to read? (pp. 114-115)
- Why do the names Passchendaele and Bellevue Spur mean that Beatrice, Barnaby and Leonard are going to be busy? (p. 117)
- Does Beatrice think she will enjoy being in the choir? What changes her mind? (pp. 120-122)
- Where or who does Beatrice's new bicycle come from? Why does her mother agree that she can keep it? (pp. 128-130)
- Why is Beatrice looking forward to Christmas? What is her Christmas Day like instead? (pp. 131-134)
- Why does Mr Maxwell says "Rich, poor. It's all the same in the end"? (p. 137)
- What is 'shell shock' and who suffered from it? (p. 144)
- What was the significance of someone handing over a 'white feather' in war time? (pp. 145-146)
- Why did Mr McPherson in the hospital have nightmares? (pp. 167-168)
- What is the Red Cross Bureau for the Missing and Wounded? Why does Hannah want to go there? Why does she want Beatrice to come with her? (pp. 172-173)
- What or who is a 'conscientious objector'? What is the difference between a 'deserter' and a 'defaulter'? (pp. 189-191)
- What is 'the biggest possible secret' that Hannah had kept from Beatrice? (p. 209)
- What does 'armistice' mean? (p. 212) How did people celebrate the end of the war? (pp. 222-224 & 228)
- What is influenza and why was it worse than in other years? (p. 232) How did people try and avoid catching it? (p. 238-239 & 247)
- Who sent Beatrice flowers, and why? (p. 270-271) (p. 79)

ACTIVITY 1: 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 2: LIFE HISTORY

Write down in order the main events of Beatrice's life. Write down in order the main events of your own life.

Activity 3: 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 4: WOMEN IN WAR

Make a list of all the ways that women helped keep their communities together when so many men had gone to war. Pick one of the women featured in the book and write a short story (biography) about her life.

ACTIVITY 5: RESEARCH

Choose an aspect of WWI, the armistice or the influenza epidemic mentioned in the book and conduct a research assignment about it. Present your information as an essay, on a poster or in an oral presentation.

ACTIVITY 6: MORSE CODE

Write a simple message that might have been sent in the novel. Research the Morse code alphabet and translate your message into Morse. Pass it to another class member to solve, and try to solve the message they have written in Morse.

ACTIVITY 7: Letters

Write a letter from Beatrice to Caleb, or from Caleb to Beatrice.