

WINNER
GUARDIAN CHILDREN'S FICTION PRIZE

Units written by Dr Pam Macintyre and Dr Susan La Marca

***How I Live Now* by Meg Rosoff**

Years 9 -10

Background

Troubled and troublesome, fifteen-year-old Daisy (her choice of name, originally Elizabeth) is sent to live with her eccentric cousins in rural England, a stark contrast to her apartment life in New York, because her step mother is about to give birth, and Daisy's father is at his wits' end with her. Bubbling in the background is an awareness that not all is right with the world.

Daisy's acerbic voice draws us into this compelling story. Not long after she arrives in the UK, her mother's sister, Aunt Penn, travels to Oslo to a peace summit, and war breaks out in England. Despite attacks on London, initially all proceeds much as usual for the self-sufficient group of Osbert, Isaac, Edmond, Piper and Daisy, except that Daisy and fourteen-year-old Edmond fall into a passionate relationship. But then the war and occupation intrudes, the cousins are separated with Piper and Daisy being sent to stay in a distant village, and it becomes a matter of survival for them.

Objectives

[Students] develop a critical understanding of the contextual factors involved in the construction and interpretation of texts, including the role of audience in shaping meaning... They critically examine the variety of ways in which spoken language influences audiences and, in their own presentations, experiment with a range of persuasive techniques.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) *VELS English* - Learning Focus, Level 6, page 22.

They explain how texts are shaped by the time, place and cultural setting in which they are created. They compare and contrast the typical features of particular texts and synthesise information from different texts to draw conclusions.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) *VELS English* - Reading, Level 6

WINNER

GUARDIAN CHILDREN'S FICTION PRIZE

Focus: Unconventionality

Mode of telling:

Daisy's acerbic, fragmented mode of telling, which relates only what she thinks is important to know, means that we as readers are continually involved, filling in the gaps.

Central characters:

The central characters of Edmond, Isaac and Piper as perceived by Daisy are not the standard characters of fiction for young people: Isaac barely speaks and seems to be able to communicate with animals (Daisy calls him a dog whisperer); Edmond seems to be able read Daisy's thoughts, and intuit what is behind what people say. And Piper has an inner goodness that is not about morality. Daisy recognises their qualities and sees that they need protection from a more pragmatic, cynical society.

Relationships:

Edmond and Daisy develop a sexual relationship but is it true love? What does the book suggest? The second part is important here.

Focus: Utopia and Dystopia

- Initially Daisy perceives the **utopia** of rural England with its cats, goats, ducks, old rambling stone farmhouse, and lack of adult intervention. She awakes to '*everything was perfectly still and beautiful and I stared and stared expecting to see a deer or maybe a unicorn trotting home...*' (p12).
- This is contrasted with the **dystopia** of the war when it arrives in the village: the cousins are separated and faced with physical horrors and violence.

Assessment

Utopia and Dystopia:

- Debate that Rosoff's utopic presentation of rural England (rustic innocence, tranquillity, simplicity, protection from harm, young people working together harmoniously) is either conservative or radical.
- Compare Rosoff's dystopia with some famous literary and filmic ones such as Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *1984*, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*.
- Map the features/ideology they have in common.

WINNER
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- 1932, 1949, 1982, and 2004 are the years of publication/release of these texts. Research each historical period. Do they have anything in common that would give rise to a dystopic view of the future?

Further Reading

Stroppy Girls

Barnes, Helen *Killing Aurora*
Gildiner, Catherine *Too Close to the Falls*
Hyland, M J *How the Light Gets in*

Future War / Utopia / Dystopia

Lott, Tim *Fearless*
Malley, Gemma *Declaration*
Marsden, John *The Tomorrow series* and the *Ellie Chronicles*
O'Brien, Robert *Z for Zachariah*
Swindells, Robert *Brother in the Land*
Westerfeld, Scott *The Uglies series*

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– Mark Haddon, author of
*The Curious Incident of the
Dog in the Night-Time*