

# SS Penguin SOS

by Adrienne Frater

## About the author

Adrienne Frater was passionate about writing, especially for children. She had several books published by trade publishers and a large number of stories published in the School Journal and by local and international educational publishers. Many of her stories have been broadcast by Radio NZ and she also published a selection of her stories in 'Flying Free. Stories and where they come from – a book for curious children', Atawhai Press, 2015.

'SS Penguin SOS', Adrienne Frater's story of the wreck which was one of New Zealand's largest maritime disasters, and the heroic actions of her Great-Aunt Ada Hannam, was particularly dear to her heart. She felt that there was little knowledge of this tragedy and determined to write about it. As well as researching material on the wreck and its aftermath, Adrienne researched her family history extensively, managing to interview an aunt who recalled memories of Ada.

But how do you write a story based on a family tragedy? Adrienne decided to write through the experiences of Jack (her father) who lived with Ada and her son Wally in their boarding house for many months several years after the disaster.

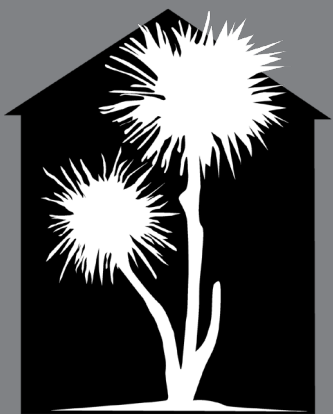
Adrienne, who sadly died in February 2020, was herself very much a heroine. Despite suffering from severe health challenges for many years, she doggedly carried on writing, insisting that this was helping keep her alive. And Adrienne has left a legacy of stories that children, locally and internationally will continue to read and enjoy. She was so delighted when she learned that One Tree House would be publishing her junior novel 'SS Penguin SOS'.

## SS Penguin SOS and the New Zealand Curriculum

The teachers' notes written for OneTree House preteen and early teen fiction are based on levels three and four of the New Zealand English Curriculum. 'SS Penguin SOS', however, is a work of factually faithful historical fiction and as such it is appropriate that the teachers' notes for this work be based on levels three and four of the New Zealand Social Studies Curriculum. The following notes and exercises will fit within the four overall strands of:

- identity, culture and organisation
- place and environment
- continuity and change
- the economic world

and will be aimed at a mix of Level 3 and Level 4 Achievement Objectives.



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# Synopsis of novel

This fascinating work of historical fiction revolves around the tragic sinking of the Union Steamship Company SS Penguin off the south coast of Wellington in February 1909, and with seventy-two lives lost it is still one of New Zealand's most deadly twentieth century shipwrecks. The Penguin was built in Glasgow Scotland in 1864 and was bought by the Union Steamship company in 1879. In 1902 it began the Cook Strait run and until its sinking in an unexpected summer storm on February 12th 1909 had been a reliable and successful inter-island steamship. Frater's young narrator is actually her father and through him she conveys the tragic circumstances in a very honest and engaging manner.

Eleven year old Jack from Picton has lost his father to the post World War One influenza epidemic and to ease the burden on his grieving mother he moves in mid-year 1921 to Wanganui to live with his Aunt Ada and her twelve year old son Wally. Jack is a bright lad and is keen to do well in an essay his teacher sets the class which is to be based on a heroic figure. Wally suggests that Jack base the essay on his mum and Jack's aunt, Ada Hannam, because unknown to Jack she became nationally lauded for her heroic actions during the traumatic sinking of the Penguin. Despite losing her husband and all four of her children to the storm, she managed to assist in the rowing of a lifeboat until it was flipped and also saved a young boy from certain drowning. Another factor in ensuring she survived, the only woman to do so, was the need to ensure the survival of her unborn son, Wally, whom she was carrying at the time.

When Jack asks if he could base his essay on her this private and somewhat dour woman surprisingly agrees as she realises that her son needs to know the details of what actually happened on that terrible night twelve years prior. The bulk of the book becomes a story inside a story, as over a period of two weeks Ada tells her story, while simultaneously we become immersed in Jack's own eleven-year-old boy's world.

Modern readers of Frater's story not only learn about this important but largely forgotten maritime tragedy and the nation's response to it, but will also have a window into New Zealand society circa 1909 and New Zealand circa 1921, ie pre and post World War One. Today's young readers will recognise a lot about these past times but, as you would expect, some aspects about life back then will make New Zealand seem like a totally foreign country, particularly the social mores of the times.

## Year level suitability and application

This book will work well with students from year six to year ten but is likely to be most successful with year eight students. Our narrator is a boy but girls will enjoy this story as well, and many will have new appreciation of modern day attitudes to sexual equality compared to the much stricter gender expectations of the past.

The book will work well for both English and social studies teachers and perceptive teachers will use it as a vehicle for engaging students in more good examples of historical fiction.

## Social studies level 3 Achievement Objectives application:

- understand how people remember and record the past in different ways
- understand how the movement of people affects cultural diversity and interaction in New Zealand
- understand how groups make and implement rules and laws

## Social studies level 4 Achievement Objectives application:

- understand how people pass on and sustain culture and heritage for different reasons and the consequences
- understand that events have causes and effects
- understand how people participate individually and collectively in response to community challenges

## Learning opportunities

### Before reading: Setting the scene

#### Prior knowledge discussion / activities:

- Students share their awareness of New Zealand's lengthy history of maritime disasters. Many will have heard of the Wahine disaster but it is unlikely they will be aware of the even larger SS Penguin disaster.
- Hold class discussion on how both Polynesian and early European explorers discovered New Zealand, ie ocean navigation and the dangers inherent in that.
- Hold class discussion on the importance of maritime transport, especially inter-island ferries, to the New Zealand economy then and now.
- Hold class discussion on the post-world war one influenza epidemic - and of course this is a good time for discussion on how New Zealand has coped with the Covid 14 epidemic compared to the world experience.

### During reading:

Understanding the content. Students may give oral or written answers. For teachers familiar with other OneTree House teachers' notes the following questions are more thematic and analytical than they may be expecting.

#### Chapter one:

1. Comment on the circumstances of how Jack's father has died.
2. How might this epidemic be handled differently today?

#### Chapter two:

3. Before his mother telling the story what did Wally know about the events of February 12 1909?
4. What does his lack of information about his family circumstances tell you about parent – child relationships back then?

### Chapter three:

5. How are weather conditions used as a linking mechanism in this chapter and throughout the story telling?
6. What do the weather conditions at the start of the voyage and the very different conditions later in the voyage tell you about New Zealand's weather patterns and how does our physical geography influence this?

### Chapter four:

7. What are Steerage Passage customers on the ferry?
8. What does this suggest about social classes of the time?

### Chapter five:

9. Comment on the importance of Pelorus Jack to New Zealand.
10. How does Ada interpret his appearance beside the boat?

### Chapter six:

11. What is a 'bread and dripping' sandwich?
12. What sort of life jacket was handed out to passengers?

### Chapter seven:

13. What is the 'parsing' exercise that Jack does in school?
14. What does this tell you about differences in schooling then and now?
15. Many children were lost as lifeboats were being lowered. What does this tell you about safety regulations and evacuation procedures of the times?

### Chapter eight:

16. Do some quick research on the Whanganui (Wanganui then) Durie Hill Elevator.
17. What would the two penny entrance fee equate to today?

### Chapter nine:

18. Would a year 8 boy be likely to break a leg playing rugby at lunchtime at your school?

### Chapter ten:

19. What are the mothballs in the clothes cupboard used for?

### Chapter eleven:

20. Explain the terms 'runt' and 'kindling'
21. What are your thoughts about how Ada reacts during the dreadful time immediately after the disaster?

### Chapter twelve:

22. Explain how Ada and Ellis survived under the boat?

### Chapter thirteen:

23. What does Jack's punishment tell you about schooling then compared to now?
24. When was corporal punishment banned in New Zealand schools?
25. What was the Proficiency exam?

### Chapter fourteen:

26. What sort of stories and history lessons does Miss Bones give the children and what does this tell you about schooling then and now?

### Chapter fifteen:

27. Do some quick research on where exactly Ada's upside-down lifeboat hit the Wellington south coast.

### Chapter sixteen:

28. Locate Thom's rock.
29. Locate Makara Stream and Makara village.

### Chapter seventeen:

30. What are the only possessions Ada lands with?

### Chapter eighteen:

31. Miss Bone collects 45 exercise books. Would this be a normal sized class for the times?
32. Who provided an excellent service to the shipwreck survivors when they finally made land?

### Chapter nineteen:

33. Do some quick research on what sort of cars were in New Zealand in 1909?
34. What private transport did many people still use in 1909? What are the pros and cons of this method of transport compared to the family cars of today?

### Chapter twenty:

35. Draw a picture of the type of trolley Jack and Fred made?

### Chapter twenty-one:

36. Comment on the reaction of the Union Steamship response to the disaster?
37. What is one very practical thing the company did for Ada?
38. What is the shop that was Kirkaldies and Staines now called?

### Chapter twenty-two:

39. What evidence is there that the funeral in Picton was a very important occasion for the community?
40. What did Ada do with her portion of the money that was raised for survivors?

### Chapter twenty-three:

41. How do the boys paint their trolley?

### Chapter twenty-four:

42. What will Wally do if her passes his exam?
43. Do some quick research on the changes to school leaving age during the 20th Century.

### Chapter twenty-five:

44. Do quick research on the physical layout of the Whanganui coastline.
45. Do you think this town is more important now or less important than in the past or not? Justify your answer.
46. What do you think of the Union Steamship Company being willing to take on Wally at only thirteen years of age?

### Chapter twenty-six:

47. Describe a trifle dessert.
48. Cream is kept in a 'safe'. Explain what this is and comment on food storage then and now.
49. Do you think this town is more important now or less important than in the past or not? Justify your answer.

### Chapter twenty-seven:

50. In the prizegiving there is only one prize for all of the standard five class (apart from Jack's special one). How does this highlight a major difference between education then and now?

### Chapter twenty-eight:

51. Can you find a slang term used by Jack that probably would not be used in 1921?

### Acknowledgements:

52. Google 'The Wreck of the Penguin' by Bruce E Collins and read some reviews of the book. See if your local library has the book.
53. Look up the National Library of New Zealand site 'Papers Past'. Which of the papers listed in the acknowledgements are still operating?
54. Look at [www.theprow.org.nz](http://www.theprow.org.nz) and read about the disaster.

### Activity three: Guest speakers on New Zealand schools of the past

Most school communities will have access to senior citizens who may be able to visit your students and to discuss with them what their schooling experiences were like.

### Activity four: A 'family hero' essay / report – written or oral presentation

Every student will be able to find someone in their family, past or present, who has been instrumental in defining that family. This exercise, of course, mirrors the essay Jack had to write for Miss Bone.

### Activity five: Dealing with trauma

This needs to be handled very sensitively. Students do research into how attitudes to supporting those in deep stress have changed over the years. Discuss with students how in Ada's time the expectation was that people would 'put on a brave face and just try to get on with it', compared to the 'wrap around support' provided to trauma victims today. What are the pros and cons of both methods of dealing with trauma?

### Activity six: Natural disasters

Students research a climate influenced disaster that has had a major impact on life in New Zealand, eg the Wahine disaster or the Erubus disaster. Their findings should be part factual, ie what happened, and part analytical, ie in what way did human failings or lack of awareness play a role in events and what learnings took place as a result of the disaster?

### Activity seven: Class debate on the following (very difficult) moot

"There are no natural disasters, only human failings"

## Post-reading: Taking it further

Select one or more of the following activities

### Activity one: Recording the Past

Discuss with students the various formal and informal methods we use to record and remember important events in our nation's history. Students select one formal method, eg ANZAC day commemoration, and one informal method, eg word of mouth family stories, and write a report on the roles each play in remembering the past.

### Activity two: Class visit

If possible arrange a visit to your town/city museum or some other institution that plays a part in physically remembering the past. Usually curators or other officials of the institution will be only too happy to share their expertise, if given ample warning of the visit.