



# Nor'East Swell

by Aaron Topp

## About the author

Hawkes Bay based Aaron Topp is a former teacher and a writer. His first book *Single Fin* (Random, 2006) is a coming-of-age story about a boy obsessed with surfing. Based on a true story, *Single Fin* won an Honour Award in the Young Adult Fiction Category of the New Zealand Post Book Awards for Children and Young Adults 2007. His second book, *Creating Waves*, is a series of mini-biographies of famous creative New Zealanders who surf. 2015 saw the publication of Topp's Young Adult novel *Hucking Cody* (Mary Egan Publishing). The novel tells the story of Cody, a young mountain biker whose unlucky run with girls, his family, and his job starts him on a journey of self-discovery. *Hucking Cody* received a Storylines Notable Book Award in 2016 and was a finalist for the Young Adult Fiction Award in the 2016 New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults.

## Synopsis

Witi's father was listed as having abandoned his family and that's just how Witi sees it. But when he is on his surfboard, feeling the surge of the sea, he somehow feels close to him. He also knows his rock-star father was diagnosed as schizophrenic, and lately Witi has been wondering if it is something he could have inherited. Alana, his friend and equal surfing enthusiast, is sticking close as she sees him struggling. He needs answers.

This is when Jordy appears – a new student who has transferred from Australia. Jordy is out-going, mouthy, confrontational – the opposite of Witi but Jordy seems insistent on being friends. He even gets himself invited home and proceeds to poke around in his father's private space. Here Witi finds his father's journal, written as an open letter to his son, telling him of his history and hinting at why he has disappeared.

There is a storm brewing as his mum's father and extended family come to embrace Witi and tell him of both his father and the ancestors who are expecting Witi to protect the tribe from what is coming. His mother has protected him from this until now, but the coming storm means action is needed. The three teenagers search for clues in his father's shed and find hints that lead them to a deserted beach. Without telling anyone they load up and leave as the pull from elsewhere increases and the voices in Witi's head get louder.

But when they get to the coastline the sea is raging and there is a new pseudo military installation with sinister intentions built on the open beach. A private army is in charge, and they appear to be trying to capture the energy of the sea under the control of none other than Jordy's father. It seems his friend was a trojan horse. To succeed this organisation wants Witi and his father because they know they have the wairua needed to supply the energy they are after.

## Themes

In her review of *Nor'East Swell* for the NZ Herald, Louise Ward said "upon beginning this novel, we think we know what we're dealing with: a missing father, a mystery, follow the clues, let off some teenage steam. But this goes way deeper." This is true of the themes. Topp explores the power of the natural world and the way humans seek to exploit or protect it. Through Witi he examines what it is to discover your potential, the importance of family and friends you can trust, and the consequence of our decisions.

## Characters

**Witi** is the main character who we encounter at the age of eighteen. From only a few pages into the novel we get hints that Witi is somehow connected to water, although it takes time for this connection to become clear. Uncertain what is going on, Witi is at times fearful that he may be mentally ill, something that is deeply concerning for him after mental illness affected his father. Witi is respectful and supportive of his mother and his girlfriend Alana.

**Alana** is Witi's only real friend and she also surfs. Surfing is the glue to their relationship in the beginning but through the novel she supports him to discover more about his father and the mystery surrounding his disappearance.

**Jordy** comes from Australia and suddenly appears in Witi's school and favourite surf beach. He is determined to befriend Witi but he pushes boundaries and is hiding things.

**Witi's father** is also a major character, appearing in the novel through diary entries. A failed rockstar he struggles to understand himself and what is happening to him.

## Setting

*Nor'East Swell* is set on New Zealand's East Coast, though the exact beach and town are not named.

## Writing Style

Topp chose a writing style and artistic outlook for *Nor'East Swell* that targets reluctant readers, applying minimalistic prose with short chapters to make it more visually palatable and to give a sense of achievement. He also chose to include minimal punctuation, for example there are no speech marks in the text.

## Year suitability and application

The novel will work very well with year 10 and 11 groups.

## Learning Opportunities

### Before reading: Setting the scene

#### Reading the cover for visual/verbal clues:

- Students work in pairs to study the verbal and visual clues given by front and back cover of the book. They make a set of predictions on plot, character and setting based on those clues alone.
- While doing this, students can also make a list of statements that identify how they are being 'positioned' by use of colour, contrast, images, layout, font style. Are these indicating a particular genre for this story?

#### Prior knowledge discussion / activities:

- Students share any personal experience they have of ocean activities and why New Zealand is a country full of beach lovers.
- Get students to discuss what effect climate change is having on the world's storms and oceans. What might this mean for people living in New Zealand?
- Get students to research classic rock music from the seventies and discuss the effect it has had on contemporary music.

### During reading: Understanding the content – answers may be written or oral.

#### Make references to the story to support the answers (where applicable).

#### Dumbass Blond Newbie:

1. What does the first page tell you about Witi?
2. What does 'got a ticket on themselves' mean? Is there a nationality who would more likely use this saying?

#### Outta My League:

3. How does the author describe Witi's anxiety attack? Suggest another metaphor that could be used.
4. What's happening with families in this community? Why do you think that is?
5. Why do you think Witi and Alana seek such an isolated and adventurous place to surf?

#### Entry 12:

6. Who do you think is talking and who are they describing?
7. Name four examples of surf jargon used in this chapter.
8. Do you think the father believes his son is naturally gifted or has special abilities? What makes you believe this?
9. What might be the reason for the author putting the 12th entry here and not in sequence?

**Offer A Ride:**

10. Why do you think Witi is reluctant to offer Jordy a ride?
11. Describe your first impression of Jordy at this point in the story. Do you change your mind by the end of the story?

**It Was Coming:**

12. How do you think the weather report and Witi's dream are linked?

**Entry 1:**

13. Water and music play a large part in the character's upbringing. Describe why you think the two are similar.
14. What is the term used to describe how the character could be happy away from the water?

**I'm Coming With You:**

15. In what ways does the author show the reaction of Witi's mum to his father's disappearance?
16. What type of friend is Alana turning out to be at this point in the story and what makes you feel this?
17. Research the difference between 'negative ions' and 'positive ions'?

**Entry 2:**

18. What does Father O mean by 'exercising both parts of the brain'?
19. What is the question Father O asks himself and what book is it from?
20. Why do you think Father O is confused?
21. There are references to five albums – give the full names and the band / artist of three of them.

**When You're Ten Everything's True:**

22. What do 'tapu', 'Kaumatua' and 'whakapapa' mean?
23. Draw what you think the bone carving looks like from the author's description.
24. What is the news Alana shares with Witi?

**Entry 3:**

25. Give an example of how Witi's father has the unique ability to wow people with his music? Are their artists that move you in this way?
26. Write three adjectives that you think describe Charlie.
27. How does the author demonstrate what makes Witi's mother stand out from everyone else?
28. Give 2 examples of similes used in this chapter and suggest alternatives. Would your options be stronger?

**Disturbing The Years Of Peace:**

29. Why do you think Witi 'flinched' when Alana talked up the shrine to Jordy?
30. What Australian states are Noosa, Ballina and Bondi in?
31. What sort of man was Witi's father? Give examples from what Jordy sees in the garage.
32. What do you think Witi thinks of Jordy now? Has his opinion changed?

**Entry 4:**

33. Name two consistent themes the author uses to describe the music industry.
34. What effect does the music industry have on Witi's father?
35. Draw a picture of Witi's dad at the beginning of the chapter. Now draw a picture of him at the end.

**He Messed Up Dad's Stuff:**

36. Do you think Witi has had many friends back to his house for dinner? How can you tell?
37. What's so special about the room Witi finds Jordy in?
38. Do you think Jordy overstepped the mark, or did Witi overreact?

**Entry 5:**

39. What is 'wairua'?
40. What are two things Witi's father was sad about? What are two things he was excited about?

**There's A Buzz Around The Place:**

41. How do you know that Witi is jealous when he enters the library? How does Witi act to pretend it doesn't faze him?
42. Why does Alana end up asking Jordy to the dance?
43. What 'costumes' would Witi and his dad wear when busking?

**Risky Move In This Crowd:**

44. What are three facts about the band Cream? What do you think made the Cream branded t-shirt his favourite?
45. Give three examples of how Witi compares the crowd inside the room to the ocean.
46. What does Witi's opening song have in common with the one his dad played the first day he was in Oval Records?

**Entry 6:**

47. Why was there singing before Witi's parents could enter the marae?
48. Why do you think Witi's mum decided to go back home?

**Together:**

49. What was the hallucination Witi saw in his room?
50. If you were Witi, would you have told Alana about the dishwashing incident when she arrived? Why?
51. What does 'rhetorical' mean?

**Entry 7:**

52. Why does Koro insist on taking Witi's dad down to the ocean?
53. What does 'kaitiakitanga' mean? Why is it so important to the world?
54. Why is there a comparison to being born again when Witi's dad goes for the surf?

**I Can't Reach Him:**

55. Why does Witi like his mum talking about his dad in 'the present tense'?
56. Explain the different approach to opening the box that both Witi and Alana take.

**Entry 8:**

57. What kaimoana did the group collect off the reef?
58. Why were the group worried about Witi's dad? What do you think they thought of him?
59. Why was playing the guitar similar to his first surf with the group?

**Not How I Remembered:**

60. Why do you think Alana is so motivated to solve the disappearance? What traits has she shown so far to make you think this?

**Entry 9:**

61. What is 'mauri'?
62. Draw a flow diagram of the journey mauri takes from the sun to a human on land as described by Koro.
63. What does Koro say gives off vibrations?
64. Are there other people who believe in such vibrations and how do they manifest?

**A Big Farkin' Nor'east Swell:**

65. Where in the world are the famous surf spots Ulluwatu and Bells Beach?
66. What do the terms goofy-footer and nor'east swell refer to?

**Entry 10:**

67. What is the connection between the dreams and wairua?

**We Were Next:**

68. Name a recent cyclone to travel to New Zealand.
69. Why does Witi become focussed on the figure '8'? What are two other examples from within the story where 'circles' are referred to?

**Entry 11:**

70. What is the big event Witi's dad is unaware of?

**A Beautiful Mind:**

71. How do you think Witi feels when his mum explains her side of the story?
72. Who would you believe, the diary or the mother? Why?

**Nowhere Else To Go:**

73. Why is Witi so happy to meet Koro?
74. What is the main difference Koro mentions between his own lifestyle and Witi's mum?
75. Do you think Koro already knows about Witi's abilities? Why?

**Black:**

76. Draw four waves and point out the 'peaks' and 'troughs' in Witi's dream.

**He Talks To The Sea:**

77. Why is Koro so happy to see 'the room'?
78. Do you think Koro is suspicious of Jordy? Why?
79. Explain why Witi's mum left the family home.

**Last Chance And All That:**

80. What are some of the benefits surfers get from being in the ocean?
81. What was Alana's reason for wanting to leave?
82. What was Jordy's reason for wanting to leave?
83. According to Witi, what is the reason Piwakawaka appear friendly?

**Initials In The Tree:**

84. Who scratched the numbers in the back of the truck and when?
85. Use one adjective each to individually describe Witi, Jordy and Alana as they entered the native forest.
86. Why did Witi feel some 'affinity' while they were walking.
87. What factors in this chapter lead to Witi's 'worse night of his life'?

**Felt Like A Goofy:**

88. What would Alana think about the two guys fighting over her? Why?

**Cease Its Rage:**

89. What was Jordy so happy to see when Alana met them?
90. What happened in the river?
91. Research CPR what is the correct ratio of chest pumps to breaths someone has to do.

**Tell 'Er What You Did:**

92. In what ways are Witi and Jordy opposite characters i.e. beliefs, interests, motivations etc?

**The Eye Of It:**

93. What did Witi say guided him?
94. Do you think Alana and Jordy believed Witi when he confessed everything? Why?
95. When they were down on the beach, what else was Witi dealing with?

**Whaddya Waitin' For?:**

96. How do surfers use rips in the ocean to their benefit?
97. What were the two reasons Witi held back from paddling into the waves straight away?
98. Name a superlative that would best describe how Jordy felt after his wave.

### **A Moving Car In The Night:**

99. Describe what Witi experienced inside the barrel of the wave.
100. What is the 'tombstone' referred to?
101. Where else in the story does Witi experience 'blackness'?

### **Runnin' Against The Wind:**

102. What happens after the eye of the cyclone passes?

### **Eyes Like Ocean Currents:**

103. What did they find and how did they know Witi's father had been there?
104. Draw a picture of what Witi must have imagined his dad looked like after living in a cave.

### **Something Going On Here:**

105. Why is Alana angry?
106. How does the poem on the cave wall confirm what Jordy told them?

### **Sit On The Power Throne:**

107. What's an Aquarian?
108. What is Jordy's father 'prospecting'?
109. Why was Jordy confident the soldiers weren't going to hurt him?

### **Cyan And Yellow-White:**

110. What flashbacks does Witi have when he's standing in the ocean?

### **With Every Inhale:**

111. How did the fantail help Witi?

### **Dark Sockets:**

112. Why should Witi have been 'fleeing the place out of respect'?
113. Why did the numbers freak him out?
114. How did the other half of the carving help him?

### **Myths And Lies:**

115. What three traits were used to show each wave was unique?
116. What did Witi's mum accuse Koro of doing to Witi's father?

### **In Watery Limbo:**

117. What did Witi find out about his mum while on the cliff?
118. How did Witi stop the bullets?

### **Don't Look Like Much Of A Threat:**

119. Name the equipment that was positioned on the beach.
120. What similar themes from earlier in the story are used to describe Jordy's father? Draw a picture of what he looks like.

121. What does Jordy's father have to do with Witi's father?

### **Dingo's Fat Head:**

122. Would you have trusted Jordy when he appeared in the tent? Why?

### **It's Evolution:**

123. How did Witi create a diversion to get inside the tent?
124. Try drawing what Witi saw on the whiteboard.
125. What is an 'outlier'?
126. What are three things Jordy's dad tries to persuade Alana with to show they're doing the right thing?
127. Why does Jordy's dad think climate change is good?

### **My Cuz And The Pretty Wahine:**

128. Why did Alana react the way she did when Witi exited the tent?

### **The One Dimension:**

129. According to Koro, where is the energy source and entrance?
130. What does Witi have to rely on to guide him?
131. Give the simile used to describe what Witi feels while paddling in the ocean.
132. What is the word Witi uses to describe the old surfboard?

### **I'm Finished All Right:**

133. Who are the souls Witi sees while underwater?
134. Why is his father with the souls?
135. What's the main difference between a statue and a memorial?

### **A Raiding Titan:**

136. Explain what is meant by 'a long period swell'.
137. Give an example of a simile used.

### **Other Plans For Him:**

138. Why couldn't Witi catch the wave under his own power and effort?

### **Tried To Say Goodbye:**

139. How would you describe Jordy and his father's relationship?
140. How does Witi describe how his dad looks?
141. What is 'waiata tangi'?
142. Why didn't Witi get back in the helicopter?

### **We're Not There:**

143. Why doesn't Witi's dad accept the carving?

### **Take That Silver Lining:**

144. What is the reference to the totara tree about?
145. Why did Witi feel uneasy about being around the whānau?

## Post reading: Taking it further

The author mentioned two important issues in the writing of this work:

- That he wished to provide a work that would excite a reader such as himself without the distraction of extra visual elements such as speech marks, bouncing around on the page.
- That he felt there is a link between story and the poetry of music. As a result, he has kept the sentences visually short, sometimes written in more poetry form.

Discuss these elements with the class. Have a debate about whether the layout made the reading more or less accessible. Was it noticeable or was the story so captivating such elements disappeared?

### Individual work – NCEA level 1 Written text essay questions.

Attempt one of these questions from the 2017 level 1 Written Text external exam. Note that the first question works very well for this novel.

- Describe at least one challenge faced by a character in the written text. Explain how this challenge helped you understand the character.
- Describe at least one idea that changed your perspective or point of view in the written text. Explain how this idea changed your perspective.
- Describe a key moment in the written text that surprised or shocked you. Explain how this moment was important to the text as a whole.
- Describe a character that you disliked or admired in the written text. Explain how your feeling towards this character helped you understand the text as a whole.

- Prepared by OneTree House and Aaron Topp

*Aaron Topp is available for school visits*