



# The Tomo

by Mary-anne Scott

## About the author

Mary-anne Scott lives in Napier. Many of her previous titles have been shortlisted for the YA section of the Children's Book Awards: *Snakes and Ladders* (Scholastic); *Coming Home to Roost* (Penguin) and *Sticking with Pigs* (One Tree House).

*Sticking with Pigs* published in 2018 and was Shortlisted for the Children's Book Award Trust Copyright Licensing NZ YA Award in 2018 was Shortlisted for the 2018 NZ Mountain Film and Book Festival and was named a 2019 Storylines Notable Book. Her latest titles, *Spearo* (a 2021 Storylines Notable Book) and *Fantastic Mr Bean* were published in 2020.

## Synopsis

Mary-anne Scott has nailed yet another gripping rural Aotearoa set novel. This is a genuine page turner and will be enjoyed by country kids and townies alike.

The Davidsons are farmers near Gisborne and there are six in the family: Mum, Dad, three sons; teenagers Skip and Phil, and Oliver who is about eight, and one very important dog, Blue, who plays rather a plot link in the story. As the novel opens Mum has called an important family meeting and the lead up to this exposes interesting family dynamics, particularly the sibling rivalry between muscular, confident Skip and smallish, hesitant Phil. We discover that Dad has advanced cancer and his once fit and strong farm manager's body is half the size and confined to a wheelchair.

Much to the boys' dismay Mum informs them that Christmas will not be possible this year as she and her husband have to travel to Auckland for two weeks of specialist cancer treatment and this is a chance they need to take up. Eighteen year old Skip is already living and working on another farm so not much change for him, but Oliver, much to his horror, is to stay with a fussy aunt in Gisborne, and fifteen year old Phil is to do general farm hand work on a large sheep station inland from Gisborne and near Mt. Whakapūnake – limestone and tomo country. There are two bonuses on Phil's side in this arrangement, he gets to take Dad's pride and joy, Blue, with him, and Chopper and Penny, who run the farm, have a very lovely teenage daughter, Emara – although Skip warns Phil that she is way out of his league and not to bother getting any ideas above his station.

Once Phil arrives on the actual farm, however, the downsides become very obvious. Chopper Harris is an intolerant grump who refuses to let Blue work on the sheep and who forces Phil to do boring and menial work. But Emara, who is as lovely as predicted in every sense of the word, and general farm hand Tuku are very much on his side.

As the novel's title and some foreshadowing suggests, the limestone tunnels and caves in this hill country play a big part in the novel, and it will be no surprise when Blue falls into a very deep tomo while chasing an errant ram. Due to the very real danger Chopper refuses to allow a rescue attempt and Phil and Emara are filled with despair, knowing that Blue, if still alive, will die a slow and lonely death. The only time to attempt their own secret rescue is very early in the morning following a rowdy adults New Year party. The plan is for Skip to climb down a carefully knotted rope (Phil is crazy about knots) and then climb out cradling the no doubt injured Blue. Once at the hole though, Skip's courage evaporates and it is Phil who performs the bulk of an astonishingly brave and torturous rescue, although both



he and Skip become seriously injured in the process. The rescue attempt is an excellently crafted piece of writing and we feel every bruise and scrape Phil suffers.

The novel concludes with promising news on the cancer front and a variety of new understandings. The combined ordeal the boys suffered has allowed a very repressed brotherly love to bubble to the surface and it is very satisfying to see a more understanding side to Chopper as he acknowledges his prior shortcomings and apologises for not taking better care of Phil. And things definitely seem to be hotting up on the Phil and Emara front as well.

## Themes – Issues

The novel deals with a lot of issues very pertinent to the teen audience. Perhaps the most important is not judging people on appearances and avoiding the ease of stereotypical preconceptions.

Phil proves that size of heart and size of willpower far outweigh muscle and stature – and while Emara proves to be as physically beautiful as Phil was warned, it is her beauty of spirit that is far more important – in fact once we meet Emara her physical beauty is barely mentioned.

Another important theme for all readers, not just teens, is the danger of repressing your feelings and having the courage to reach out for help. We only discover at the very end that Chopper’s unacceptable behaviour is to do with the huge pressure he is under through his role of running such a large sheep station, and yet he only acknowledges this at the very end. It is to be hoped that many of the male readers of this novel will feel empowered to express their feelings more, particularly to other males in their families.

While brotherly rivalry is very common in most cultures, unchecked it can be very damaging, and Scott covers this well. Skip’s ‘I love you bro’ towards the end of the book is beautiful music to Phil’s ears.

Another theme teachers may like to stress is to do with the power and spirit of the physical environment and to accord the natural world the love and respect it deserves. This theme underlies the entire novel and is well worth unpacking. Dialogue from farmhand Tuku will be very useful in this exercise.

The environmental arm wrestles between pragmatic Chopper and “greenie” Emara also make for interesting reading.

## Characters

**Phil** is the main character and Scott ensures we fully empathise with his struggles – being short of stature and eyesight can be a hindrance in such a physical environment, but he more than makes up for these supposed shortcomings by strength of determination and spirit.

**Emara** is also an interesting character. Rarely in young adult fiction do we encounter a lead female who is unashamedly beautiful (why is this?), but Scott handles this well and we soon learn to focus on her strength of personality and her

inner beauty. Perhaps Scott’s point is that physical beauty carries its own burdens and, just like lack of stature and clear vision, often leads to unwarranted assumptions.

**Skip**, Phil’s older brother, is a bit of a jock when we first meet him but as the crisis point of the novel unravels it is satisfying to observe the emotional growth he undergoes. Interestingly his muscles and outward confidence are no match for Phil’s courage and determination.

The other character who undergoes growth of character is **Chopper Harris**, the tough and hard-bitten farmer. He is portrayed as the stereotypical short-tempered bigot. One glance at short, thin and “four-eyed” Phil is enough to convince Chopper that Phil will be a ‘bloody nuisance’ rather than a help on the farm – despite Phil’s obvious dog and horse handling skills. Watching Chopper eat humble pie towards the end of the novel is very satisfying indeed.

## Setting

The high country inland from Gisborne is described very well and, like farmhand Tuku, we quickly understand the mana and wairua of this special place. However it is in the descriptions of the of the tomo that Scott comes into her own and few readers will not be immersed into the dark dangers lurking in their depths.

Scott also has a very good feel for the routines of farming life and many readers will enjoy the descriptions of life on a large high country sheep station – particularly when she is describing the working horses and the very important dogs.

## Writing style

The novel is written in the past tense and uses third person (limited) narration – however the frequent dialogue and Phil’s interior monologues definitely give the novel a first person narrative feel, especially in the cave rescue scenes. The writing is descriptive without being over-written.

The accessibility of the writing and the relevant subject matter makes it an engaging and fairly quick read, even for reluctant readers. Teachers will enjoy analysing the cave rescue passages and allowing students to see how well-crafted written language, verb use in particular, can be just as engrossing for teens as video or film.

Scott has a very good feel for dialogue in general and the relationship subtleties it can portray if handled well. Despite the third person approach, the narrative voice never dominates in this book and we are usually shown situations, not told about them. I also like the way Scott almost casually uses farm jargon throughout, never feeling the need to overly explain the jargon to us townies. The working horse / dog language and the farm job jargon is good subject matter in itself.

## Year level suitability and application

The novel will work very well with year 10 and 11 groups, although the adult themes will also be relevant to older students. Like Scott’s previous novels this one is ideally placed for Level 1 English NCEA Written text questions,

particularly questions linking character exposition to theme or main ideas conveyed (see below).

## Curriculum links

English syllabus, of course, but also Aotearoa physical geography. There are also very direct links to the P.E. / Health syllabus.

Teachers of year 10 Health will find good material for physical / mental health and wellbeing, personal identity / self-worth, safety and risk management, sensitivity and respect, relationships with other people, social attitudes and beliefs and interpersonal skills. It would be great to see a class set of this novel sitting proudly in the Health classrooms of the country.

## 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. After reading the novel they can go back and check their predictions.
- While doing this, students can also make a list of statements that identify how they are being 'positioned' as readers by use of colour, contrast, images, layout, font style.
- What is a 'tomo'? Students brainstorm ideas of what it might be, then research to find out.

#### Prior knowledge discussions:

- Class discussion on the various assumptions we make based purely on physical appearance and the long lasting damage these assumptions can lead to if not directly challenged – good link to the junior Health syllabus.
- Class discussion about their knowledge of the workings of a farm (some communities will know more than others). What is the hierarchy of a farm and how might it affect the characters? What about the animals, how do they play different roles on a farm (i.e. what is a heading dog? Why are heading dogs silent?).
- Class discussion on the value of farming to the economy – and on the environmental tensions that exist in a country such as ours that is still very dependent on the exporting of meat. Again, this discussion may go different ways depending on the urban or rural background of the students.
- Cancer plays a part in this narrative and some students may find this brings up painful memories while others will have very little knowledge of cancer (i.e. ask the class for their knowledge about lymph nodes). How might our experiences affect how we approach a story? This discussion needs to be handled with sensitivity.
- Class discussion on the concept of land having a spirit or wairua and the very long-lasting culture clash problems

that occurred due to the inability of early European settlers to appreciate this point. Students to discuss or write about a part of the country that they have strong emotional links to, eg a certain beach or river, and to try to unpack what it is about the place that has led to this connection.

### During reading: Understanding the content – Answers to these may be written and/or oral

#### Chapter one:

1. What is normal and what is a bit unusual about the family dynamics?
2. What arrangements have been made for each of the three boys while their parents are in Auckland?
3. What is the connection between the vegie garden and Phil's father?
4. What might the last sentence in this chapter be setting you up for?
5. Learn more about the setting of the story. Where is Gisborne? What sort of topography. Mt Whakapūnake is very important in Māori mythology. What about Tiniroto and the proof that moa were last sighted here, what more can students learn about this?

#### Chapter two:

6. What sort of relationship do Phil and Skip have?
7. List two pluses and two negatives of Phil's first day on the farm.

#### Chapter three:

8. What clues are there that Phil is experienced with horses?
9. In what ways was Chopper setting Phil and Blue up for failure when he gave them a try out on his sheep?
10. Why do you think Robbie refused to go into the area near the cliffs?
11. Why does Phil start weeding the garden?

#### Chapter four:

12. List three things Phil admires about Emara.
13. In what ways are her farming ideas very different from her stepfather's?
14. Explain how tomo are formed.

#### Chapter five:

15. How would you react to Chopper's behaviour if you were in Phil's shoes?
16. What is controversial about Emara's tee-shirt?
17. What does Phil like about the thistle grubbing task?

#### Chapter six:

18. Why doesn't Phil want to return Blue to Gisborne on the day his mother says?
19. What issues were Chopper, Penny and Emara arguing about?
20. In what ways does Phil's day take a nosedive?

### Chapter seven:

21. What disaster has befallen Blue?
22. What is Choppers reaction?

### Chapter eight:

23. What is it about Skip's reaction that gives Phil a little hope?
24. What does Emara say that makes Phil feel even worse?
25. Describe Chopper's pig hunting mates.
26. What does Phil vow at the end of the chapter?

### Chapter nine:

27. Why does Chopper not want Phil to come to the tomo?
28. What annoys Phil about Tuku's story about the mountain?
29. In what ways does Chopper seem a slightly nicer person towards the end of this chapter?

### Chapter ten:

30. What is clever about Emara's timing for the attempted rescue?
31. What do Skip and Emara bicker over?
32. What is Oliver's useful contribution to the plan?

### Chapter eleven:

33. Describe the relationship between Phil and Oliver.
34. Which brother do you think Emara prefers and why?
35. What two events hold up their departure?

### Chapter twelve:

36. What is it that really prevents Skip from climbing into the tomo?
37. What impact on Phil does Skip's declaration of love have?
38. Describe the difficulties at about 15 metres.
39. Describe Blue's reaction when she meets up with Phil.

### Chapter thirteen:

40. How was Blue lifted from the tomo?
41. Describe some of the physical and mental tortures Phil is subjected to as he attempts to climb out.
42. What connection does he make with his father's difficulties during the toughest part of the climb?

### Chapter fourteen:

43. What plan do Emara and Skip formulate to finally get Phil out of the top part of the tomo?
44. Describe some of the mind games that Phil plays to try and force himself to keep going.

### Chapter fifteen:

45. What disaster occurs as soon as Phil thinks he is out and safe?
46. Describe how Skip sacrifices himself to try and prevent more harm to Phil.

### Chapter sixteen:

47. What is Chopper's reaction when he finally arrives at the tomo?
48. Quote a sentence from him that shows some admiration for their teen's astonishing feat.
49. What is a Porangi friend?
50. What does Phil mean when he says that Oliver is 'a listening sponge'?
51. What changes do you notice about Chopper in the hospital?
52. Why does Phil's mother say that saying 'sorry' is important?
53. In what ways has his ordeal changed Phil?

## Post reading: Taking it further

### Theme analysis:

#### Activity one: Group work activity

Select two of the themes / issues listed earlier in these notes and get students to write what the author may be commenting on and how she may be positioning them to think about these issues. When considering the 'how' aspect students will need to closely consider character presentation. A group spokesperson reports findings to the class.

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

Attempt one of these very typical level 1 Written Text external exam questions (note how perfect *The Tomo* is for these questions).

- 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 new understandings by this character better helped you understand the text as a whole.

#### Role play activities: (these need to be handled with sensitivity and be closely monitored by the teacher)

- In groups select a short scene or episode from the novel. Present it to the class using a combination of existing dialogue and your own added dialogue.
- Monologue – adopt the role of one of the main characters and speaking in character explain your relationship with another character.
- Monologue - Speaking as Phil one year in the future, reflect on events of a year ago.

## Beyond the text activities:

- Research the geological explanation for tomo and discuss their importance to the country. Use Waitomo as a case study.
- Write a 'guide' for teens outlining how to respond to others' stereotypical assumptions about them. Design a poster or make a short film promoting the idea of judging people on inner qualities, not outer ones.
- Knots play an important part in the story and in the imagery for the book. Research the knots at the beginning of each chapter: can students learn how to tie them? Create a chart of the different knots comparing their characteristics (i.e. slippage, strength, usage).
- Compare and contrast dogs and horses as working animals versus pets or show animals. What is similar, what is different? This could become a topic for a debate moot.

## Useful websites:

[Know your knots, videos and information from NZ Maritime Museum](#)

[The New Zealand Speleological Society](#)

[New Zealand Caving Areas](#)

[Caving equipment and culture](#)

[Livestock numbers in New Zealand - Stats NZ](#)

[National Library Topic Explorer for Pets and Farm animals](#)

[Description of the agrichemical sector in New Zealand](#)  
(part of a large document looking at the sustainability and stewardship of agrichemical containers)

[GNS information on the Hikurangi fault](#)

Prepared by Denis Wright