



# Touchstone

## Teachers' Resource Kit

Written by Linda Biggs for Lorraine Orman

## **The Novel**

Sixteen-year-old Skye hates secrets, but when she travels to the remote West Coast of New Zealand to meet her long-lost family she becomes embroiled in more secrets than she can imagine – relating to her family, the past, and the environment.

## **The Author**

Lorraine Orman was a librarian for many years, and began writing books for children when she retired from full-time work. She has published five books for younger readers and four books for teenage readers. *Cross Tides* (winner of the NZ Post Best First Book Award) and *Hideout* are the YA predecessors to *Touchstone*.

## **Highlights of Touchstone**

- Looks at different versions of the 21st century family
- Examines a troubled mother-daughter relationship
- Evaluates truth versus lies
- Explores the need for self-esteem in teenagers
- Haunting and atmospheric setting on the remote West Coast of New Zealand's South Island
- Strong conservation theme looking at the ethics of coalmining in wilderness areas
- Interweaves the past with present-day events, such as the effects of the Great Depression

## **Plot Study**

Elements of plot include the setting and the action of the story. Plot develops the story and gives us information about the characters and events that build to the final climax and resolution. It is the 'glue' that ties all the other elements together.

- There is more than one plot in this novel. Identify the three plots.
- Make a plot-structure diagram for one of the plot strands. There are many of these diagrams online, some of which are interactive. Identify the initial incident, the rising action, falling action and resolution.
- How does each chapter further the events and our understanding of the character(s) in the story?

## **Conflict**

- What are the conflicts which develop throughout the story?
- When Joshua learns the truth about his relationship with Skye he rejects her. He has an internal conflict. What is it about? How does he come to accept it?
- Skye also has an internal conflict about who she is and her self-esteem. How does she eventually resolve this?
- Eden and Terry have never solved the conflict between them. What makes them finally accept each other?
- Archie has had a conflict over the lie he told so many years ago. How has it affected him over the years?
- The conflict between the conservationists and the mining company is 'solved' when Stuart abandons the plans to blow up the dam. The wider conflict between conservation as opposed to development continues. In your opinion, which has the stronger claim?

## **Character**

There are three ways in which a reader can make a judgement about a character:

- By what the character says
- By his or her actions
- By what other people say about them

Keep this in mind when considering the following questions.

We are introduced to the two families by the end of chapter three.

Draw up a family tree showing characters with their respective family members. Show how the families are related.

### **Protagonists:**

#### **Skye**

Read the first 2 chapters and list some of Skye's personal comments about herself. She seems to have quite low self-esteem. For instance she talks about the 'Beautiful People', giving the phrase capitals, as if they are a separate group, a far more successful/important group than other people.

- What is the cumulative effect of these personal comments?
- What is your opinion of Skye?
- At what point in the story does Skye begin to make her opinions and wants heard? What gives her the courage to do this?

Skye has built up a story around her father because she never knew him, partly from her mother's recollections and partly from her own imagination.

- Why is it necessary for her to do this?

This story later turns out to be untrue.

- What other aspects of her life are proven later to be untrue? How does the new knowledge make her feel? How does she deal with these revelations?

The petrified stone becomes crucial to Skye at various points throughout the story.

- At what times does she use the stone to give her courage?
- Contrast Skye with her mother in both appearance and character. How do they differ?

How do these differences affect their relationship? How does their relationship change by the end of the novel?

- Revise your opinion of Skye – from beginning to end of the story.

## **Joshua**

- Choose 5 of the following adjectives which you think describe Joshua:

**Impulsive; dogmatic; naïve; enthusiastic; trusting; thoughtful; loyal; resourceful; emotional; determined; courageous; bright; affectionate**

Write two paragraphs describing Joshua, using the adjectives you have chosen. Provide evidence from the novel in your paragraphs.

- What does Josh think of his mother's gay relationship?
- What teasing has he had to endure because of it?
- How has his lack of knowledge of his father affected him as he grows up?
- What does Josh think of Skye when he first meets her? How does their relationship develop?
- How has Josh changed by the end of the novel? What has he learned about himself? What has he learned about the motivations of others – e.g. Stuart; his mother and aunt; his great-great uncle?

## **Minor characters**

Minor characters often act as a 'foil' or contrast to the protagonists.

### **Family:**

#### **Archie**

Archie's secret led to a lifetime of lies, which seem to be continued by his grand-daughters. The secret affected the life of their mother (Mary, Skye's grandmother) quite severely; it led to their estrangement.

- Describe Archie: His appearance and the way he speaks make his character real. Also consider his opinions about coal mines, the protesters, and life generally.
- Why does he want to tell his secret now?

## **Terry and Eden**

- Describe the sisters.
- How are they different?
- What are the secrets they have kept from their children?
- Why did Eden, as Skye says, prefer to 'run away' from her problems? At what point does she begin to face up to the truth?

## **Janice**

- Janice is Terry's partner. Describe her feelings for Craghead and the possibility of the mine being further developed.

## **Paul**

Paul plays a very minor role as Eden's partner. He seems to be genuinely attached to Eden and to Skye.

- What good personal qualities does Skye say he has?
- Why has he been rejected by Eden?

## **Geordie**

does not appear except in Archie's memories and in the prologue.

Describe his character from the Prologue and what Archie says about him.

- What influence do his actions have on subsequent events? How do we know he made a success of his life?

## **The Wero Valley Taskforce**

Stuart

Joe

Diana

Miriam

Ben

- In what way(s) are some of these characters stereotypes?
- Draw up a chart which shows the motivation of each protestor in the Wero Valley campsite.
- Examine the character of Stuart more closely. He appears to be quite a smug person. Find instances throughout the story where he 'puts down' the others in the WVT. Skye, as an outsider, is aware of this even before she knows why: consider the way Stuart speaks to her and about her to the others. Josh seems to be in awe of Stuart and won't hear anything against him. Find and quote instances where Josh looks up to Stuart.
- Stuart does have some redeeming features: he does not want Josh or Skye involved in his actions, and is insistent that they do not know the details of the proposed protest action. Consider this when you make your assessment of his character.

# Themes

## The title:

- Find out what a 'touchstone' is. How is the word used figuratively as the title of this story?  
How does it fit with the themes of the story?

In therapeutic use, what does petrified stone represent? Try looking at this site:

<http://www.crystal-cure.com/petrifiedwood.html>

Or this one:

[http://www.healing.about.com/od/gemstonesaz/p/p\\_petwood.htm](http://www.healing.about.com/od/gemstonesaz/p/p_petwood.htm)

There are many other sites which you can research. Try searching 'therapeutic stones'

- How can it help people to carry a touchstone?

Skye depends on her touchstone to give her courage.

- At what points in the story does Skye use the touchstone for courage?
- What happens to Skye's touchstone?
- What do you think this means for Skye's future?

## Family

There are two 'nuclear' families in this story:

Eden and Skye

Terry, Janice and Joshua

Neither of these families is the 'traditional' family of mother, father and the children. Both are different in some way.

- Describe the differences

Eden and Terry are sisters. Their mother is Mary (whom the reader hears about but does not meet). Mary's father is Archie, and Eden and Terry's grandmother is Iris, who married Archie, though she loved his brother Geordie.

Skye is friends with Mandy whom Skye believes lives in the ideal family.

- Why do you think Skye wants to be the same as Mandy?
- Why does it upset her that her family is different?
- What does Eden think about 'family'? Consider her responses to Skye's questions and also the fact that Eden is not able to settle in a relationship.
- Archie wants the family to get back together. Why does he want this?

Eden and Terry are estranged and have not spoken for more than 16 years.

- What harm does their estrangement and secret cause their mother (Mary) and themselves?
- What are the effects of it on Skye and Joshua?
- What are your thoughts about the theme of 'family' as presented in this novel?

## The natural world vs. development

Except for the Dunston Mine, the wilderness area in the fictional Wero Valley is largely pristine, that is, it is in its natural state. Resources have not been developed. The theme of nature or development (ie. coal mining) runs throughout the story. New Zealand has a large number of National Parks and Conservation land areas. Recently the National Government suggested that mining could be allowed on conservation land. The owners of the Waihi Gold Mine (Martha Mine) wish to extend their operations under the town of Waihi.

- What are the arguments against mining?
- What are the arguments for mining?

These are some sites you can look at to help you formulate your answers:

<http://www.forestandbird.org.nz/branches/west-coast/west-coast/save-the-denniston-plateau>

<http://www.straterra.co.nz/Perspectives>

[http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=10823122](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10823122)

<http://www.odt.co.nz/news/business/232315/environment-court-consider-denniston-plateau-mining-project>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLsJWPtwYp8&feature=youtu.be>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqfYwy61dvY>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Escarpment\\_Mine\\_Project](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Escarpment_Mine_Project)

<http://www.minerals.co.nz/>

<http://www.watchdog.org.nz/>

<http://www.waihigold.co.nz/>

## Secrets, Lies and Truth

There have been secrets in the family since Archie told Iris a lie about Geordie's intentions. He betrayed both her and his brother. Lies to maintain the 'truth' of their secret were told by Eden and Terry in order to 'protect' their children.

Do some research around the psychology of telling lies and keeping secrets.

- Who does Archie hurt in his goal of winning Iris for himself?
- Eden and Terry suffer because of the secret they keep. How do they deal with it and in what ways do they try to forget that the secret exists?
- Both mothers and Janice are very anxious about the developing friendship between Skye and Josh. Why?
- Skye and Joshua are angry and bitter when they find out the truth. Why do they feel this way?
- Secrets and lies have fragmented this family. Should children always be told the truth?
- Think about the following emotions: feeling ashamed, fear of rejection, being judged. These are all reasons for maintaining the 'truth' of a lie, for not telling the truth about a family secret. Using examples from the book, analyse whether Archie, Eden or Terry felt any of these emotions.
- What do you think the author's message is about family secrets?

The other secret that has been kept for over a year is Stuart Dyer's true identity and his intentions.

- How do the members of the WVT react when they find out the truth?
- How does Joshua react? Are his reactions similar or different to those he experienced when he discovered his mother's secret?

## Style

### Narration

The novel has two narrators: Skye, whose narration is first person and Joshua, who is written about in third person.

- What are the benefits of having two narrators?
- Skye's narrative is first person. What are the benefits and disadvantages of this method?

- Josh’s story is narrated in third person. The reader sees his thoughts and feelings. Why has the author chosen to have one third person narrator and one first person?

## Structure

In the early stages of the novel the chapters are interwoven around chronological and past events. A prologue begins the novel. Its events have effects many years later.

Some of the chapters are narrated by Skye and some about Joshua. They tend to fall into a pattern of one or two chapters by Skye followed by one or two about Joshua. Note that the method of narration lends itself to ‘cliff hanger’ type chapter endings while the action moves to the events around the other protagonist.

- What is the purpose of organising the chapters this way?
- What effect do the ‘cliff-hanger’ chapter endings have on the reader?
- What conflict is established in the Prologue? What conflict is established in the early chapters? Later in the plot another conflict arises. What is it?

## Diction

Look at chapter 28. Find the passage which describes Skye’s flight from Stuart.

- How has the author used active verbs to describe Skye’s flight?

Now look at the sentence structure in the same passage.

- What kinds of sentences have been used?
- What effect is the author intending by using this sentence structure?

## Making Characters Real

Think about the ways that the characters dress, speak and consider their actions. These make them seem real to the reader. Archie, for instance is portrayed as a very old man through his clothing and the fact that he is bedridden. His speech conveys his family origins.

- Choose one of the characters and analyse how the author has made them real people, so that the reader believes in them.

## Setting

There are two settings: Auckland and the West Coast of the South Island. The fictional town of Craghead is based on two real coal mining towns. (See Author’s Note at end of book.) The West Coast has a real presence in the story. Look at the author’s descriptions of the landscape, Miriam’s introducing Skye to the fauna of the area, and Josh’s love of his environment.

Skye has been brought up in Auckland and Josh mainly in Westport and Craghead.

- Describe Craghead and the surrounding area. Contrast it with Auckland.
- Make a picture or photo essay which clearly shows the difference between the two settings.
- How does the author create a vivid mental picture of Craghead and the nearby open-cast coal mine? Contrast this with the unspoiled nature of the surrounding wilderness.
- The setting has an effect on the atmosphere and on the characters. How does it affect all the main characters? Consider the characters who left Craghead: Geordie and Eden. What are the setting's effects on Archie, Joshua and Skye?
- Overall, how important is the setting to the story? Consider how it fits in with plot and theme.

## Quotes

### **Quotes: (these are presented in order from the beginning of the novel)**

This list is not exhaustive and there are many characters' thoughts (rather than spoken words) which could be used to discuss feelings and themes.

Students could categorise quotes which relate to a particular theme or character.

Who said each of the following quotes from the story? Why is the quote significant?

- 'I have an idea that just might put things right.'
- 'Paul was sitting on the sofa ... today he looked like he'd shrunk.'
- 'What a loser. She's so ordinary, so dull, there should be a hole where her head is.'
- 'When will I hear a voice in my head and know it's mine?'
- 'IMHO, the therapeutic power of crystals –which she totally believes in - is a load of new age crap.'
- 'I've made a good life for the two of us. We don't need anyone else.' 'I give you everything you need and more.'
- 'That's right. Run away, like you always do.'
- 'Stuart was a total legend. He'd follow him to the ends of the earth.'
- 'That agitator, activist, whatever you call him ... a born troublemaker that one. I can smell him.'
- 'People worked for a living in those days. You protesters need to do a few shifts down the pit...'
- 'They don't want to know me... They've disowned me ... just drop it.'
- 'Why won't you talk to me about them?'
- 'It hurts too much.' Suddenly her eyes were shiny with tears.

- 'He was very strict with her. Authoritarian.'
- 'Petrified wood. I know you don't believe in therapeutic stones but I'll be happier if you keep it in your pocket.'
- 'They scrape off all the bush and topsoil ... then they gouge out the coal with explosives and bulldozers...'
- 'The town where time goes backwards.'
- 'Greenies, hippies ... cannabis patches hidden away in the bush... And there are still some old-timers hanging on...'
- 'Does the sun ever shine up here?'
- 'How come you never told me I had a cousin?'
- 'My ... my cousin?'
- '... there's a totally untouched, unspoilt area called Wero Valley ... we want to stop the mine.'
- 'I don't mind the past. It's the present I have trouble with.'
- 'Secrets. This bloody family is riddled with secrets.'
- 'You're not used to tramping, you don't know the countryside ... it's not a safe environment for you.'
- 'I can't see the point of digging up the past. It doesn't make any difference to me ... what happened fifty years ago is useless.'
- 'They're planning another protest action... It's going to be something big, a headline grabber...'
- 'Some people were so frightened by the ride up that they didn't go down again until they were in their coffins.'
- 'Both of us did bad things, very bad things, in our different ways.'
- 'We were bred tough in those days.'
- 'Yeah. We're all into the environment... If this lot vanishes it's only a matter of time before we go too.'
- ... the ecosystems – exist only on the Buller coal fields. They can't be found anywhere else in the world.'
- 'That's the way they like it. Out of sight, out of mind. It covers 2300 hectares. They reckon there's still 30 million tonnes of coal waiting to be mined.'
- 'Coal is helping to kill our world.'
- 'I preferred sponge cake, but for some reason, Iris never managed to steal any.'
- 'Geordie loved Iris, but you married her.'
- 'You don't know Josh at all... One day with a person doesn't mean you know him.'
- 'You still believe you're better than anyone else, don't you?'
- 'You're as bad as she is. You and your bloody secrets. Treating me like a kid.'
- 'They need to know the truth. Right now.'
- 'Coal is the lifeblood of this part of the country. Coal means jobs, jobs attract families and houses and towns.'
- 'I shouldn't say this – but it was a bugger of a job.'
- 'Remember when we swore a blood vow that we'd get out of here? ... Get away from this stinking place.'

- 'Funny thing ... I hung it on the Singing Tree. It stayed there for at least twenty years. Then it disappeared... I looked all over for it, but I could never find it again.'
- 'Just the packs of anfo in the B load ... the detonators and the rest are with me.'
- 'Don't worry. I'll be safely in the wind... I'm sick of mollycoddling that bunch of losers.'
- 'Parts of the mine are still burning. They've been burning for decades. It's impossible to put the fires out.'
- 'Skye wants to be a geologist too...You two brainboxes should get on like a house on fire.'
- 'Oh, boss man Stuart's a law unto himself. He shows up whenever it suits him.'
- '...during the summer we'll use a natural gas cooker because of the fire risk, but I'm afraid the gas cooker gets used most of the time now because it's so much easier.'
- 'Okay, okay, he's superman. I'll take your word for it.'
- 'I'm a coward, a wimp. I try to keep other people happy all the time which is stupid...'
- 'There's a special bond between us. I don't know what it is but it's there.'
- 'This plan. This protest – it doesn't sound right to me. What do you reckon?'
- 'They sent me here to save things. Not wreck them.'
- 'Mr Smarty-pants Stuart's got it all worked out.'
- 'Josh is like my son. I've known him most of his life. I don't want to see him hurt... Are you starting some kind of relationship?'
- 'You're also ... half-brother and sister.'
- 'This ... it's too much. It's ... sick.'
- 'He was ... a good man I mean. He never meant to hurt anyone.'
- 'Secrets are poisonous bloody things. Nobody knows that better than me.'
- 'You've gained a brother. I can tell you that's very, very precious.'
- 'In the middle of a bitter winter, with families starving and tons of coal sitting in the bins, the company directors raised the cost of a truckload of coal from three shillings to one pound.'
- 'He kept saying this place was killing him...'
- '...between her parents and me, she never stood a chance.'
- 'We thought it was better to let sleeping dogs lie ... it probably would have been better if we told her.'
- 'a new life ... just like Mum. These days it's called reinventing yourself.'
- 'It'd come charging down the creek like a tidal wave. It could do a lot of damage.'
- 'I'm not just being a frigging nanny when I say you shouldn't be involved in this protest. You're a decent kid.'
- 'Eden just wanted the whole mess swept under the carpet. Like a pile of dirt.'
- '...you know what he's like. Always the boss man...'
- 'He's going to double-cross your protest group by blowing up the wrong place and getting you all into trouble.'
- 'A squeaky clean city girl who doesn't know a thing.'
- '...they'll end up being labelled terrorists...'
- '...then when it suits them, they'll betray you...'
- 'He said something about anfo ... What's anfo?'
- 'We'll remove the anfo from the dam wall. Not much point in carrying on..'
- 'The country needs it. And the world wants coal.'

- 'So I decided to send you off with a bang...'
- 'She decided to get even for a lifetime of being second best.'
- 'Some people have no weight to them. They bend whichever way the wind blows.'
- 'We can still demonstrate and hold rallies and organise meetings.'
- 'Have you ever thought that she does it because she's trying to stop you being like your father?'
- 'Sounds weird. But I reckon I had help. I ran faster than I've ever run in my life.'
- 'I'm going to hang my touchstone on the Singing Tree...'
- 'I'm proud of you, Skye. You've had a tough time. And I know I'm to blame for a lot of it.'
- 'It's a cat.'
- 'His animals usually look all tortured.'

## **Discussion, Research and Debate**

- The Wero Valley Taskforce: What significance does the name 'Wero' have? How can this be applied to the protestors?
- Discuss the concept of an eco-warrior. Define the term and then discuss whether you think this kind of protest is legitimate.
- The Singing Tree is a motif that appears at intervals in the novel. What significance does it have for the people who live in Craghead and for visitors? Josh says that one day the tree will die. What do you think this means for the people who have left things on the tree?
- Mining: coal; gold; tin; precious stones; other minerals. Humanity has always exploited the earth to use its resources. At present, China is opening one new coal-fired power station every week. Research an aspect of mining – it could be historical, or a comparison of mining techniques from the past and the present. In your opinion, will mining continue?
- Research the Denniston Incline. (There is a wealth of information on the Internet.) It was a very dangerous method of transporting coal, but there was no other access at the time.
- Present a case for increased gold mining in and around Waihi and the Coromandel Peninsula.
- 'Fracking' is becoming much more common as a way to extract natural gas from the earth. In the United States, fracking is used in 25% of natural gas extraction. Research the method and come to a conclusion about its safety.

## **Debate topics:**

- Secrets are poisonous
- The past is best forgotten
- Protestors should use any means to make their point
- Natural resources should remain where they are
- Mining does more good than harm

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Disclaimer:

at the time of preparation all website links were valid, and material available on the websites was suitable for young people.

Find out more about Touchstone on Lorraine's website:

<http://www.story-go-round.net.nz/touchstone.html>