

# TEACHERS' RESOURCE KIT

*Longacre Press NZ Junior Fiction – Upper End*

## Brother Sister Soldier Cousin

by Phyllis Johnston

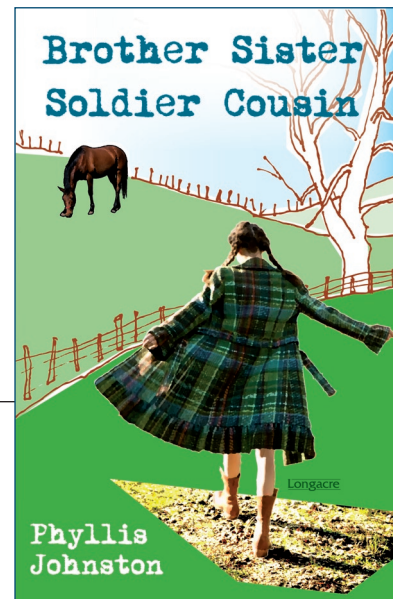
*The dog barks, the door opens,  
and Helen's life changes.*

Brother Harry is home from fighting in Egypt – just for a while. He's a breath of fresh air in the midst of food rationing and twice-a-day milking. He teaches 13-year-old Helen to drive, and to fire the rifle, just in case...

But Dad's heart is wonky, and sister Jess is an ice-queen. Then Harry lets slip that Helen's not actually who she thinks she is.

For Helen it's a dizzying job, finding the wisdom, courage and humour to 'grit up' and get on with it.

An extraordinary story evoking one girl's irrepressible spirit.



### SPECIFICATIONS:

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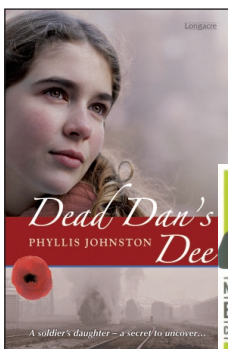
RRP: \$17.99

Format: 198 x 128 mm

Extent: 160 pp

Binding: paperback

Readership: 9 to 14 years



By the author of  
*Dead Dan's Dee*

Resource Kit contains:

- Author biography
- Language exercises
- Character analysis, and
- Creative responses and research topics

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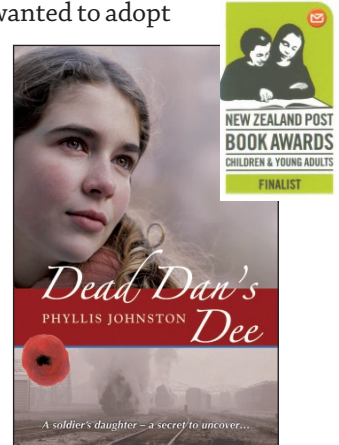
## BIOGRAPHY:

Phyllis Johnston was a child during World War II with two of her brothers serving overseas. She clearly remembers how the BBC World Service ruled their lives. Phyllis was the eighth of nine children and an aunt wanted to adopt her at birth. 'My mother clutched me in her arms and said she could never give away a child.' This story always thrilled Phyllis and it led her to imagine what it would be like to be an only daughter and wondered what it would be like to be adopted. For her this was the setting of *Brother Sister Soldier Cousin*,

a story of identity with a background of war.

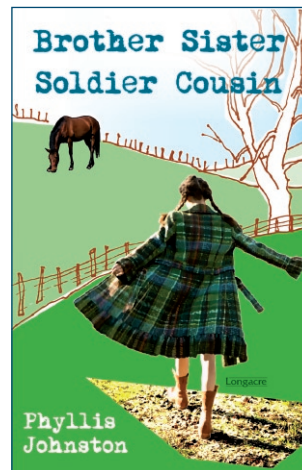
Phyllis has written many novels for children. In 1998 she was awarded the Betty Gilderdale Award for distinguished service to New Zealand children's literature. Her most recent novel, *Dead Dan's Dee*, was shortlisted for the 2008 NZ Post Children's Book Awards.

Phyllis lives in Hamilton and has three adult children.



## Before Reading:

1. What does the cover picture indicate that the book is about?
2. When and where might the story be set?
3. What does the title suggest to you?
4. What do you know about events of World War II, both overseas and in New Zealand?



## Language

1. Figurative language is used to convey ideas that might otherwise be difficult to express. Two examples of figurative language are metaphors and similes. Examples of these are, 'The full moon looked as thin as tissue paper ...' (p. 8) and 'The sky was the colour of dirty whey ...' (p. 43). Find more examples of each type of figurative language from the book.
2. What do you think the genre of this book is? List the aspects that are indicative of this genre.
3. The story is told in the first person. Why do you think the author chose to do this? Is it effective? Choose one of the passages in the book and rewrite it in third person narrative.
4. The author uses symbolism in the book. What might the following phrase symbolise: 'I was chicken.' (p. 35)? Think of three other examples of symbolism.
5. The author uses personification to help describe inanimate objects. For example, 'The radio... seemed hunched on its shelf.' (p. 46) Write a poem or paragraph about objects found in a room in your house or school using personification.
6. The author often uses animal imagery in the similes. For example, 'I felt my own face squishing up like a Pekinese dog's.' (p. 58) and 'The three of us were stuck like flies in an old spider's web ...' (p. 155). Find two more examples of animal imagery in the book. Write a simile using each of the following animals: elephant, weta, peacock, camel, hippopotamus.

7. Jess is in love with a 'Yank' (p. 12). This is a slang word for an American. List ten countries and find out the slang name for their citizens; e.g. New Zealand – Kiwis.
8. Helen says she makes an awful pun (p. 156). Think of three examples of puns and a context in which they could be used.
9. Helen calls Jess's baby HRH (p. 153). What does HRH stand for? What kind of figure of speech is this – alliteration, acronym or anagram? Find one more example from the book. Can you think of five more examples?
10. What figure of speech do the following words illustrate: 'squirm', 'strain' and 'squash' (p. 31)? Write a poem or descriptive paragraph which includes all three words.
11. Choose one of the descriptive passages in the novel which you find particularly effective and use it to set the scene or the mood for your own piece of descriptive writing. Quote the passage as the epigraph for your work and clearly state the source: title, author, publisher, date, chapter, page number.
12. Find definitions for the following words which are taken from the novel and write one sentence for each:
  - reverently (p. 26)
  - ghastly (p. 28)
  - leering (p. 31)
  - sham (p. 32)
  - deserter (p. 37)
  - cur (p. 38)
  - taboo (p. 41)
  - chided (p. 46)
  - kin (p. 60)
  - skewed (p. 66)
  - snide (p. 108)
  - lewd (p. 109)
  - lustrous (p. 112)
  - livid (p. 144)

## Characters:

1. How old is Helen at the start of the novel?
2. List the qualities of Helen's personality and find examples of her displaying each of these qualities.
3. Think of three adjectives to describe Helen.
4. Describe Helen's reaction to the following events:
  - The death of her dad.
  - The death of Ginger.
  - The birth of her sister's baby.
  - The cablegram news about Harry.
5. Draw a family tree of Helen's family (pp. 7–8).
6. What is Helen's nickname and where did it come from (p. 9)? Talk about the nicknames of your classmates and the origins of those nicknames.
7. Draw a picture of one of the characters based on their physical description. For example, Aunt Ruby (p. 11) or Jess (p. 12).
8. Write a character summary of one of the following characters:
  - Aunt Ruby
  - Mum
  - Harry
  - Dad
  - Jess
9. What effect does the revelation of Helen's adoption have on the members of her immediate family? Compare Harry's, Aunt Ruby's and Jess's reactions to the revelation.
10. How does Helen change and develop by the end of the novel?
11. What does the novel say about family and their importance during difficult times? Find episodes in the book when family members are either a help or a hindrance to Helen.

## Themes:

Discuss the following themes and find examples from the book which illustrate each:

- Attitudes towards children born outside marriage.
- Desertion in war.
- Adoption.
- Women's role in marriage and the workplace.
- Attitudes to unmarried women and particularly to unmarried mothers.

## Creative responses:

1. Write a time-line of the major events of World War II.
2. The following historical figures are mentioned in the book: Rommel (p. 7), Major Fryberg (p. 15), Lieutenant General Montgomery (p. 15) and Hitler (p. 15). Research the part they played in the events of World War II.
3. Discuss the reasons why Harry, as a farmer, is allowed to stay out of the war (pp. 7–8). Do you think this is fair?
4. Helen's dad had fought in the First World War (p. 8). When did this happen? What events led up to this war? Outline the main events of the First World War.
5. Harry mentions he spent time in Cairo (p. 10). Locate Cairo on a world map. Research the country in which it is situated and present your findings to the class.
6. The family talks about rationing and petrol coupons (p. 10). Research what was rationed in World War II in New Zealand. Create your own World War II ration book.
7. Harry mentions that some English cities are 'badly bombed' (p. 10). Choose one of the three largest cities in England and research how World War II affected it and its inhabitants.
8. Helen's mum attended first aid lessons to help (p. 10). Choose three first aid techniques and design an instruction manual on how to perform them.
9. Why does Harry call England 'Mother England' (p. 10)? Do you think New Zealanders think of England differently today compared to the way they did in the 1940s? How and why?
10. Aunt Ruby plays the part of a man in a vaudeville theatre (p. 10). What type of theatre is this? Find a play that you think would be suitable for a vaudeville theatre. Choose a scene from the play, rehearse and then perform it for your class.
11. Harry brings Mum back a carved black box from Cairo (p. 11). Research Egyptian art and design your own carved box.
12. Jess is a nurse at the Waikato Hospital in Hamilton (p. 12). Find out where the closest hospital is to your school.
13. United States marines came to New Zealand to help keep the Japanese from invading (p. 12). Did the Japanese ever invade New Zealand? Find out how your local area protected itself from the threat of Japanese invasion in World War II.
14. Helen mentions Helen of Troy (p. 13). Research this story and write it out as a comic book.
15. Helen of Troy is Helen's namesake (p. 13). Find a character, historical figure, movie star, family member, etc., who is your namesake. Write a report on them and present your findings to your class.
16. Helen and her family listen to the World News at noon and nine p.m. on the radio (p. 14). Choose one of the major events of World War II. Write and perform a radio news report about it.
17. Harry tells Helen to name the camel Ahmed (p. 16). Find out the meaning of this name and its possible country of origin. Do the same with your own name.
18. Helen walks three miles to school (p. 17). Which system of measurement for distances is now used in New Zealand? When did this change take place?
19. Helen's mother is writing a book entitled *Tales of Ruby and Pearl* (p. 19). Imagine you are the publisher of this book. Using this title, create, write, illustrate and bind a children's picture book.
20. Helen tries to find out some information about publishers in New Zealand only to discover there are none (p. 19). Research children's book

- publishers in New Zealand today. Choose one of the publishing houses and write a report on the company, e.g. when it was founded, where it is located, titles they publish, etc.
21. Helen mentions the following books: *Anne of Green Gables* by L.M. Montgomery, *Winnie the Poo* by A.A. Milne (p. 19), *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson (p. 26) and *Caddie Woodlawn* by Carol Ryrie Brink (p. 51). Write a book and/or author study about one of these titles.
  22. Fred and Bert Walmly are in the Standard Five and Six classes at school (p. 22). What years are these?
  23. Helen mentions two movie stars, Charlie Chaplin (p. 23) and Errol Flynn (p. 44). Find out the names and dates of some of the movies that they starred in.
  24. Helen's class dances an English folk dance called 'The Countess of Westmoreland's Delight' (p. 24). In groups find out about this or another folk dance, perform it, then teach it to your class.
  25. The FJC wants to help the Home Guard (p. 24). What is the Home Guard? Find out if anyone in your local area and/or family had been in the Home Guard and what role they played.
  26. Mr Moore draws a map of the world on the asphalt playground (p. 25). Draw a map of the world in your school's playground or for your classroom wall.
  27. Many different types of baking are mentioned in the book, such as lamingtons (p. 27), meringues (p. 34), Madeira cake (p. 38), scones (p. 43), chocolate cake (p. 43) and pikelets (p. 143). Choose one of these, then find and write out the recipe.
  28. Helen thinks her mum is strict and lists some of her rules (p. 29). Write out a list of the rules in your home and/or classroom.
  29. Harry and Helen play the games cribbage (p. 33) and five hundred (p. 50). What types of games are these? What is your favourite game? Design a pamphlet explaining the rules of your favourite game.
  30. Three men from Helen's town died in the war (p. 35). Find out how many men in your local area died in World Wars I and II. How are they remembered?
  31. Research some of the diseases that are mentioned in the book, including dysentery (p. 36), polio (p. 37), croup (p. 60), TB (p. 109) and malaria (p. 135). Did people suffer from these diseases in New Zealand during World War II? Are these diseases still around today?
  32. Harry gives Helen driving lessons even though she is only thirteen (p. 36). Write down the process of getting a driver's licence in New Zealand now and how old you need to be.
  33. At the ceremony, Mrs Oakley plays 'God Save the King' (p. 38). What would New Zealanders sing now instead? When did the national anthem change?
  34. At the ceremony the soldiers are each given five pounds (p. 39). Find out when New Zealand's currency changed from pounds to dollars. List which countries in the world still use pounds as currency.
  35. Helen dances the foxtrot and waltz (p. 40). What type of dances are these? List the names of other similar dances.
  36. Helen lists some of the chores she and her mother do (p. 43). Write a list of the chores you are responsible for in your home.
  37. The FJC discuss forming a Sherlock Holmes Club to help discover who stole Ahmed (p. 49). Who is Sherlock Holmes and who created him?
  38. Mike uses some number eight wire to make a fork (p. 52). Find out two more uses for number eight wire that are mentioned in the book. Think of some more ways this wire could be used.
  39. Helen's class practises an air raid drill (p. 54). What drills are practised in your school? Write out a set of instructions for one of these drills.
  40. Helen mentions *The New Zealand Woman's Weekly* (p. 67). Find out what other magazines were available in New Zealand in the 1940s.

41. Helen's class is studying the Napoleonic war (p. 73). Research this war.
42. Divide into two teams and debate whether or not Harry made the right decision to go back to war (p. 84).
43. Helen is afraid as she crosses a paddock at twilight and imagines it is a 'sea roamed by goblins and trolls.' (pp. 85–86). Think of a time when you have been afraid and write a descriptive paragraph or poem about it.
44. Mr Oakley places two coins on the eyelids of Helen's father when he dies (p. 89). Where does this custom originate?
45. Helen's mum says 'We do not know about an after-life until we die.' (p. 97). Choose three religions and explore their idea of an after-life or what happens after a person dies.
46. Helen says she feels like the tortoise in the hare and the tortoise fable (p. 103). Who wrote this fable? What other fables did he write? What is the moral of this fable? Choose another fable, rewrite it in your own words, illustrate it, and summarize the moral at the end.
47. Helen sees a fantail (p. 112). Find out the names of five other New Zealand native birds. Research and write a report on their habitats, food, calls and mating rituals, etc.
48. Mr Wyatt at the bank talks about the exportation of New Zealand butter and meat to England (p. 116). What else does New Zealand export and to which countries?
49. Helen mentions three possible career options open to her (p. 133). What other jobs were commonly available to women in the 1940s?
50. Helen's scream is compared to a banshee's wail (p. 137). What is a banshee? Where does it originate?
51. Mr Oakley compares the hay stack to the Leaning Tower of Pisa (p. 144). In which country is this structure located? What other famous structures can you think of from around the world?
52. Herman's brother is hoping to attend an Ivy League college (p. 152). Which colleges are these? Where are they located? Where does the term originate?
53. Imagine you are Helen. Write her first letter home from Hamilton Girls' High and Sonningham Hostel to her mum and Jess.
54. Imagine that books can be divided into comedies or tragedies, with comedy defined as a celebration of life, and tragedy as an example of our flaws and mortality. Which of the two modes would this book fit into most comfortably? Argue your case with examples from the book.
55. Find out more about the lives of farmers in 1940s New Zealand.
56. Design your own cover for the novel.
57. Do you think the novel could be made into a dramatic film or TV programme? Write a letter in support of the film for possible investors and design a poster advertising the movie/TV version of the novel. Think about which actors you would like to use to portray the book characters and why?
58. Write a review of the book, aiming it at the readership of your favourite magazine or newspaper.
59. Write your own version of the back cover blurb.