

TEACHERS' NOTES

Rain Fall

by

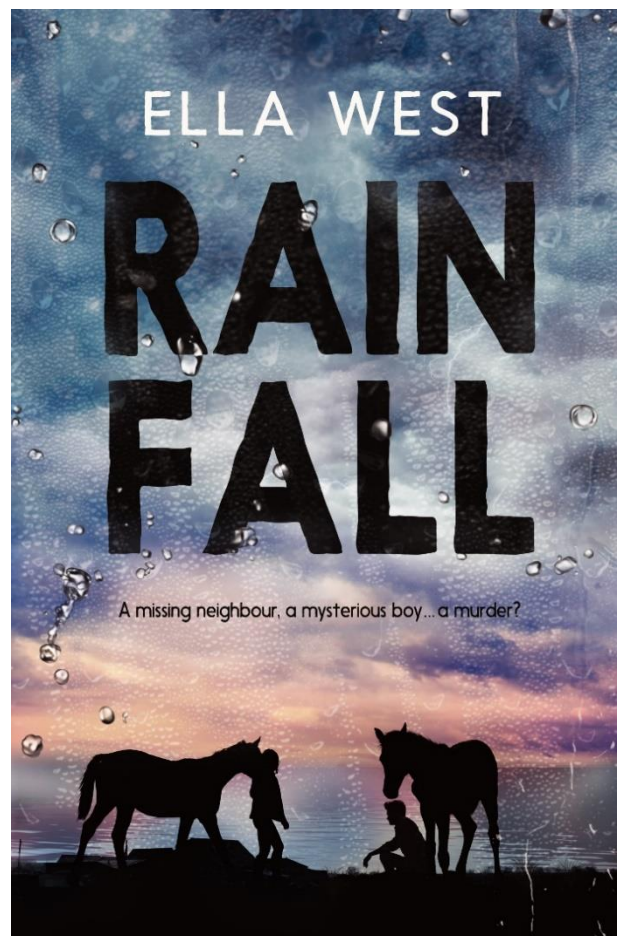
Ella West

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Recommended for ages 12-15 yrs

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INTRODUCTION

PLOT SUMMARY

Fifteen-year-old Annie needs to get to her basketball match, but the police have cordoned off her road. Is her neighbour, who she grew up with, still alive? What has he done to have the police after him?

A murder investigation brings new people to Annie's wild West Coast town, including a dark-haired boy riding the most amazing horse she has ever seen. But Annie is wary of strangers, especially as her world is beginning to crumble around her. In setting out to discover the truth Annie uncovers secrets that could rip the small community apart.

Annie is an only child, living with her parents in Westport, a small town on the West Coast of New Zealand's South Island. Annie is 15 but will soon turn 16. A major aspect of her character throughout the novel is her reserve, to the point that she herself has to wonder if just not telling something is the same as lying. It is not clear if she has always been a reserved person, but this trait is certainly encouraged by her two current anxieties: firstly, that the possibility of the local coal mine closing will affect her father, who is a coal train driver, causing the family economic stress and most likely leading to relocation to Christchurch; and secondly, that the out-of-town boy, Jack, who is 18, is just playing with her.

'...in Westport, we measure rain not in centimetres but in metres. Two, or maybe three. In a bad year we can have more.' On the first day of the novel, the rain begins and does not let up. The damp, oppressive omnipresence of the rain sets the tone of the novel and influences the plot. Just before the rain starts, while biking to basketball practice, Annie sees what she thinks is a raincoat, with arms spreadeagled, floating under the bridge. Had it been raining, she quite likely would never have stopped to look at it.

This is an early example of Annie as the naïve narrator. The book is written in present tense, first person, and at various points in the novel, alert readers may question some of Annie's observations and interpretations. However, she is an engaging narrator: bright, humorous but not too sarcastic, caring, and very aware of the town she lives in. Her main passions are basketball and her horse, Blue. It is through Blue that she meets Jack who is riding an amazing horse on the local beach. Another worry for Annie is what will happen to Blue if her family has to move to the city.

Almost a week after she sees the raincoat, Annie is stopped from biking to school by the police, who cordon off her neighbour's house, across the road, and caution the family to stay indoors. Some hours of stalemate later, the house is destroyed in a tremendous blast, clearly due to Powergel stolen from the mine. It is not known if the neighbour, Pete O'Shea, 19 years old and unemployed, was in the house.

No one who knows Pete can believe he would do anything violent or criminal. Annie begins to worry about him. Did he die in the explosion? Is he on the run from some danger or from the police? She soon concludes he escaped the blast and hid out in Blue's shed for a day. It is while she is tracking Pete's bootprints to the beach that she meets Jack, but does not tell him why she is there. Jack, it turns out, is the rodeo rider son of the detective sent from Christchurch to track Pete down.

Rain Fall is a thriller for young readers, but the tension arises as much from Annie's state of mind and the cloud that hangs over the town's economic future as it does from the on-going hunt for Pete. Readers are on edge, as we realise more than she does the danger that Annie is courting in her search for Pete. Annie is on edge because of the secrets she is keeping from everyone: meeting Jack and kissing him (her first ever kiss); the clues she is picking up about Pete; why she is riding on the beach so often; finding out from Facebook that Jack has thousands of female fans and, apparently, a girlfriend, Stella. She is also constantly aware of her parents' worries over the

possibility of her father losing his job. The clues Annie picks up seem relatively mundane and most of the book is taken up with her rides on the beach, caring for Blue, and family time at home. The rain makes most other activities impossible. But nevertheless, tension keeps building until Annie finally finds the body on the beach. But it's not Pete.

Instead she learns where he has gone and tricks Jack into accompanying her up Mount Rochfort to search for him. There the two teenagers quickly realise they are now involved in a very serious and violent criminal conspiracy. The conspirators are older men, who wanted Pete and his friend, Ben, to steal the explosive Powergel for them so they could rob banks in Christchurch. Pete has lured them up the mountain. He intends to kill them in revenge for the murder of Ben – he had been wearing the raincoat that Annie saw floating down the river and it was his body they found on the beach. Everyone is armed, including Annie, who has taken up one of Pete's guns and knows how to use it. Jack is furious but also very frightened. He soon realises that all he can do in this situation is try to keep Annie and himself safe. Especially as, on the way up the mountain, he has found out that Annie thought Stella was his girlfriend, when she is in fact his sister, and it is because of that she has been distant with him. Now they realise that they truly love each other.

But Annie is shot and it's Pete that has to save her. She wakes in a hospital bed in Christchurch, Jack by her side. The pair are regarded as heroes for managing to lead his detective father to the scene in time to arrest the criminals. Pete will have to face court, but now that the real reason for his behaviour is known, he should get a light sentence or community service. Annie's father has lost his job but has a new one, driving trains out of Christchurch, which means the family will be relocating and Annie will have to leave her beloved West Coast. But Christchurch is where Jack and his family live and Jack's father offers to stable Blue there with the rodeo horses in return for Annie working there in her spare time. The family house in Westport is sold and Jack drives over to take Blue back with him. Annie must look forward to a new future, leaving the Coast behind.

THEMES

Knowledge of horse riding, of local geography and of country towns, especially those dependent on one struggling industry, permeates this novel. Annie tells the reader directly what she knows of these, but the telling is not heavy-handed and reveals a lot of her character to us.

WESTPORT – A TOWN DEPENDENT ON COAL MINING

About *Rain Fall*, Ella West says:

I lived in Westport for about 15 years after I graduated from university. I went there for my first fulltime job and fell in love with the place and also met my husband – there was a lot to fall in love with! When I went back a few years ago for an author tour, a pupil at one of my talks asked me why I hadn't written a book set in Westport and I didn't have an answer. So I wrote this book.

Annie cares deeply about her family and her town, and wants us to understand their economic and social situation. In fact, of all the adults in the book, only Liam, recently retrenched and the kids' basketball coach, seems to understand what is worrying Annie and putting her off her game. Annie explains why all the kids show him respect and listen to his pep talk about the coming season: 'He's talking to us, not at us, and we get it. This is serious. He's our coach and we are all he has. We can't let him down.'

Annie had the choice of going to boarding school in Christchurch – an opportunity many other kids in town would not have had. Most of her primary school friends have gone to boarding school. Annie stands somewhat alone in that she is more privileged and educated than many others in town, but also because she chose to remain in town. This makes her an excellent but sometimes uncritical commentator on attitudes of the townspeople and of outsiders. She quotes her Dad's 'joke': '...the only ones left at the high school besides me are the crims, the dopeheads and the girls who are three months pregnant.'

Anne has shot a deer and she expresses anti-greenie sentiments: she sees them as people who want to stop logging and mining – the lifeblood of Westport. Given her age and her passion, it is possible Annie is just parroting the adults around her but she does make a good argument. What definitely rings true is when she expresses her strong feeling about the issues:

I don't understand it. Coalmining and logging means jobs, lots of jobs, and if there's anything the West Coast needs right now it's jobs. Sometimes it feels as if we're in the middle of a war.

N.B. In an Author's Note at the end of the book, the author tells us about the world-wide effects of a downturn in demand for coal, exacerbated by the flow-on of the 2008 global financial crisis.

HORSES

The care of horses and the riding of them takes up a lot of Annie's time. We can see her maturity in the way she handles Blue: she takes risks, galloping full tilt, but knows what they are and looks out for them. She and Jack bond over their mutual respect for each other as riders.

ROMANCE

This is also a 'first love' story with the extra frisson of an older boy as the love object. Jack is almost perfect, as befits a romantic lead. His extra maturity and sense of responsibility are often displayed but during the climactic ending, he is still a frightened teenager. We also discover that Annie is his first true love, as well, and that her reserve has been really upsetting him.

'Annie, I've got to know. Do you feel the same way as I feel about you?'

I stay still...Thinking. Thinking about us...

I nod.

'You've got to say it, you've got to tell me.' He's trying not to plead, trying not to be desperate, so I say it, what he wants to hear, just to please him. But suddenly I realise it's not about pleasing him, it's about being true to myself. It's about not hiding from the truth anymore.

'Yes. I love you.' And I reach out my hand and he holds it and smiles and looks away and then looks back at me and I know we're going to be okay.

p. 180-1

SELF KNOWLEDGE AND MATURITY

Annie seems a brighter-than-average girl. Being an only child has tuned her into her parents' behaviours, feelings and attitudes. She is without any really close friends in the town and occupies herself in physical activity rather than screen time. She cares for Blue by herself and also takes her responsibility to her basketball team seriously. She is aware of political debates that may affect her family's and her town's livelihood and has a good grasp of local history and geography.

But she is not yet 16 and is embarking on her first romance under the twin clouds of Pete's disappearance and the threat of redundancies at the mines. The quote above shows one of her common responses to situations: 'I stay still...Thinking'. Annie's self-reliance and self-doubt combine to create her withdrawal. She never tells her parents what she knows and what she is doing. She pretends to her friends that she doesn't know Jack. She does respond honestly to the detective, but this only reveals her naivety: we know the raincoat is a body, but even when the detective acts out what she is describing, she still doesn't get it.

Another common response is spontaneous action motivated by feelings, such as leaving food out for whoever is hiding in Blue's shed and pursuing Pete up the mountain. Despite her general good sense, Annie steers herself into a very dangerous situation and doesn't really grasp how dangerous it is until the last minute.

Against Annie is set the character of Jack. He is two or three years older than Annie, has grown up the son of a policeman and competes at an international level in his chosen sport. He is physically capable and responsible, clearly able to draw a line between what is right and what is wrong.

However, this is his first real romantic experience and his desire to be with Annie and protect her overrides any natural caution he may have. During the violent climax, his angry and terrified responses show us not only how serious the situation is, but also that Jack is still just a teenager.

CRIME, SUSPENSE AND ADVENTURE

The 'trapped in' atmosphere created by the constant rain and damp is a common device of thrillers: a claustrophobic feeling created by isolating their characters and a sense of foreboding that is mirrored in weather conditions e.g. snowed in, adrift in a boat. The book takes a long time to build to its climax and this increases the tension and draws the reader into the character of Annie.

The use of first person, present tense narration is a clever device that removes hindsight from the telling of the tale and replaces it with suspense. We are with Annie, in the moment, unsure of the consequences of her actions.

Although the climax represents a perilous situation for Annie and Jack, the writing style is appropriate for younger readers. This is partly because we see everything through Annie's eyes and Annie is 100% committed to supporting Pete, so for her there is never any question of turning back. Her close observation of Jack (his good sense but also real fear and powerlessness) and Pete (Will he do the stupid thing or the sensible thing?) and even of the criminals ('They look like ordinary men, men I could pass by walking down the street...') grounds the events in reality, but without gruesomeness, and, because Annie is a teenager, without much fear! This only kicks in when she is shot, but, thanks to Jack's common sense, we know from the outset that 'the bullet's gone right through' because that is the first thing he looks for. (The wound may not be so dangerous if the bullet is not stuck in it.)

LINKS TO THE CURRICULUM

LINKS TO NZ ENGLISH CURRICULUM

This text would link well to any classroom pitched at Levels 4, 5, and lower 6 of the New Zealand Curriculum. Students would be able to "Make Meaning" from the novel and there is plenty of opportunity for students to then "Create Meaning" through teacher designed activities.

The text also supports the Key Competencies of Thinking, Relating to Others, and Understanding Language, Symbols, Text. Key Competencies of Managing Self and Participating and Contributing would likely stem from normal teaching practice and classroom atmosphere. The themes present in the novel allow for classroom discussion around the Values highlighted in the curriculum document and also support many components of Ka Hikatia.

This novel is well placed as a component of a theme or genre study.

LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

Rain Fall can fit into Years 7, 8 or 9 of the secondary curriculum. The discussions and activities below fulfil a number of content descriptions at these levels in the Language, Literature and Literacy strands of the English curriculum.

COMPREHENSION AND DISCUSSION

CHAPTERS ONE TO FIVE

Comprehension

1. Which café makes the best pies in Westport according to Annie?
2. What is the name of the family's cat?

3. Did Annie or her mum film the explosion on their phones?
4. How tall is Blue?
5. Why does the coal go by train from the West Coast to Lyttelton?

Discussion

1. What is a utopia? Why does Annie point out, although she lives on Utopia Road, it is not one?
2. Why do Annie's parents not take the threat of an armed gunman in the house across the road from them seriously?
3. Why does Annie try to hide Blue's racing brand from the boy on the beach?

CHAPTERS SIX TO TEN

Comprehension

1. How old does Annie's mum think the house they live in is?
2. Why is Liam "stuck in Westport"?
3. Where did the penguin end up?
4. Why has Jack not gone this time to the United States to compete in a rodeo?
5. Why do cows get a bigger shock from an electric fence than a person?

Discussion

1. Why does Annie not want the boy on the beach to know where she lives at the end of chapter six?
2. Annie's dad doesn't want "disturbing images" to be shown on the TV news at 6pm. Do you think such images should be shown and why?
3. Do you think Harry and Di are doing the right thing by hiding the logging helicopter on their farm? Why?

CHAPTERS ELEVEN TO FIFTEEN

Comprehension

1. Where did Deadmans Creek get its name from?
2. What does Tassie do when Annie tries to ride her the first time?
3. What does the word "corralled" mean?
4. How does Annie figure out who the man at the police station is?
5. What is the thing in the washing machine?

Discussion

1. What does the description of Jack's horse float and vehicle tell us about him?
2. Why does Annie not want to look at pictures on Facebook of Stella?
3. What do you think of Annie's Facebook "policy"? What is your Facebook "policy"?

CHAPTERS SIXTEEN TO TWENTY

Comprehension

1. What music is Annie listening to on her laptop?
2. What did five men who were part of the Strongman rescue team get?
3. What does Annie need to be a 'real barrel racer' according to Jack?
4. Who is Jack really smiling at from the school stage?
5. What are the two things that Di contributes to the meal at Annie's?

Discussion

1. Why does Annie not tell her parents about finding the body on the beach?
2. At the time of the Brunner Mine disaster, there was no social welfare system in New Zealand. What do you think would have happened to the wives and children of the men killed in the disaster?
3. "Can't have a rainforest without rain," Harry says on page 161. What does he mean by this saying?

CHAPTERS TWENTY-ONE TO TWENTY-FIVE

Comprehension

1. Annie tells Jack not to go off the track up to the lake – what is the reason?
2. Why doesn't Pete have any stubble on his face?
3. Why do Pete's boots have no laces?
4. Who is holding Annie's hand in hospital? How does she know who it is?
5. What colour did Annie's mum finally paint the hallway?

Discussion

1. Why does Annie not tell Jack the real reason they are walking up to the lake? Do you think she should have told him?
2. Why does Annie dream of Tassie? What/who is she really dreaming of and why?
3. Why does Annie want Blue to take one final look at his paddock?

ACTIVITIES AND FURTHER DISCUSSION

WESTPORT

Westport is a real town in New Zealand. Using Google Maps and Google Images, find the road where Annie lives, the route she bikes to school and to the basketball courts, the beach where she goes riding and the other places mentioned in the book. Also follow the railway line to see where her father drives the coal trains from Ngakawau to Otira near Arthur's Pass.

On page 76, Annie says the town needs jobs – why are jobs important to a community like Westport? What can happen when a large number of jobs are lost, especially in a small town? Think about who buys Annie's house when her father loses his job. How will it affect the community?

Where you live, how does the weather affect what you do? How does your life change when it is too hot, or too cold or too windy or, like in Westport, too wet?

'I am a West Coaster, and this is my home, my place of belonging. It is who I am.' (Chapter 8) How does Annie's sense of home and identity change in the course of the novel? Describe incidents within the story that depict this change.

Although Westport is a real town, the house Annie lives in, and Pete's house, do not exist – there are no houses at the end of Utopia Road resembling Annie's description of the two houses. Why has the author done this? Where are the boundaries between fact and fiction in the book and why are they important? Think about the disclaimer at the start of the book – besides the story about the penguin, what else might be true/is true? Is it important for an author to tell the truth as much as possible when they use a real setting? Why?

RODEO

Watch videos online of barrel racing and other rodeo sports. Find out what the Cowboy's Prayer is that Jack talks about on page 152.

Do you think Jack is right – that rodeos are not cruel for animals? Give reasons supporting your stance including comparing rodeo to other sports that involve animals, such as horse racing.

COAL MINING

Look at the photos online of the Brunner Mine disaster that Annie talks about on pages 134 and 135 and research further what happened in each of the mining tragedies she mentions.

Find out more about the Stockton Coal Mine, its history and its future.

Annie describes the differences between conservationists and miners/foresters as "a war" on pages 75 and 76.

- Explain in your own words Annie's views on the environmental movement and its impact on the lives of coalminers.
- Why do you think she feels as though she is in the middle of a war?
- Do you think she is right or is she being too extreme?
- Which is more important – jobs or the environment? Or are both important? Can there be a compromise?

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

What person is *Rain Fall* written in and what tense? How does this affect the telling of the story? Is it successful or should the author have chosen another person and tense?

Rain Fall is both a romance and a thriller. How do these genres work to heighten the intensity of the story? Give examples of scenes within the novel to illustrate your answer.

Rain and water are constantly mentioned throughout the book—how has the author used them to tell the story? Has this trope worked successfully or not? Using examples, give your reasons why.

Vocab building

In groups, work out the differences between the following words for rain, and add any more words you can think of. Place them in an ascending order of intensity.

- | | | |
|-----------|------------|--------------|
| • drizzle | • sprinkle | • cloudburst |
| • mist | • fog | • downpour |
| • trickle | • shower | • deluge |

Brainstorm other collections of related words e.g. varieties of *perambulation* (walk, run, crawl, hop etc.) and see what similarities and differences in meaning they convey. Can they be grouped or ordered according to meaning or usage?

Play the Adverb Game. One person performs a given action 'in the manner of' for the class, and the class must guess which adverb is being performed e.g. *guiltily, stealthily, quickly, gaily* etc.

Practising stylistic writing features

Take a generic scene, such as: *The girl walked into the room and sat down*. Ask students to rewrite it in as many ways as they can, simply by using synonyms for the nouns and verbs and adding adjectives, adverbs or phrases.

- Can the different moods thus created be described in literary terms e.g. *suspenseful, lyrical, hard-boiled*...?
- This exercise can be extended by complicating the **sentence structure**—adding phrases and clauses or shifting the order of clauses—and changing verb **tenses**.
- Finally, students can build up a whole scene or short story.

Ella West writes about the Buller River in the prologue, 'After it runs freely from wild mountains deep inland, I think it must be embarrassed when it becomes a river port and then, even worse, has its final send-off over the dredged river bar into the Tasman. It gets its revenge, however....' (p.1)

- Is this passage an example of personification or anthropomorphism? What is the central difference between these literary techniques? Why do you think Ella West chose to use this technique here?
- Create your own passage using personification or anthropomorphism.

Creative writing

An important scene is missing at the end of the book as Annie is not there to describe what happens – the first meeting between Jack's dad and Annie's mum and dad when Jack's dad has to tell them their missing daughter has been found but is seriously injured, and also happens to be going out with his son. Write the scene either from the point of view of Jack's dad or from Annie's mum or Annie's dad, or write it as a scene from a play.

Take one side of the environmental debate about logging or coal mining, and produce a pamphlet to hand out at the local Saturday market.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New Zealander Ella West and her husband now live on a small sheep farm near Dunedin, having spent many years on the West Coast. Ella started writing plays for children for the New Zealand School Journal but soon crossed over to fiction and her first teen novel *Thieves* was published in 2006, the first in a trilogy. Since then she has also written several adult plays including 'The Middlemarch Singles Ball'. She enjoys writing for children and teenagers because anything can happen in a story for children. There's always magic. Ella was awarded the Louis Johnson New Writers' Bursary in 2006, and her novel *Night Vision* won the 2015 LIANZA Young Adult award and the Young Adult Children's Choice award in the New Zealand Book Awards.

