

Holiday House Educators' Guide
RIVER SONG
by **Belinda Hollyer**

THEMES

- Family
- Relationships
- Cultural Diversity
- Contemporary Issues
- Social Problems

Grades 5 up

ABOUT THE BOOK

Jessye is often confused about where she belongs. She feels safe and secure with Nana, who lives in a rural New Zealand village rooted in Maori tradition. But she loves her mum, who lives in more contemporary Auckland. Jessye's mum is unpredictable and unreliable, but Jessye decides to give her one more chance when she asks Jessye to stay with her. At first, life in the big city seems like fun. Jessye is reunited with some old friends, and meets new friends in the communal house where her mother lives. Things are going well until Mum begins drinking too much. Adrian, Mum's new boyfriend, needs money to finance his latest "get-rich-quick" scheme and devises a plan to go after Nana's land. At this point, Jessye faces the reality of her mum's world, and realizes that she and Nana need each other.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Ask students to take a pictorial journey into the Maori culture on the following website: <http://www.maori.org.nz>. Have them write a brief paper titled "What Intrigues Me Most about the Maori Culture." Encourage them to share their writing in class.

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

Family—Ask students to discuss Jessye's definition of family. How is Nana a better mother to Jessye than Mum? What does Jessye mean when she says that Nana is like her "bottom line"? (p. 8) Why does Jessye call her mum a "romantic gypsy"? (p. 14) Nana doesn't protest when Jessye's mum comes for her. Why does Nana feel that Jessye should make her own decision about where she lives? Discuss why it is difficult for Jessye to choose between Nana and Mum. At what point does Jessye realize that she doesn't belong in her mum's world?

Tradition—Engage the class in a discussion about the Maori traditions practiced in Waimotu, the rural village where Nana lives. How do these traditions help define Jessye and Nana’s life together? Which of these traditions does Jessye miss the most when she goes to live with Mum in Auckland? Explain how the traditional story of the taniwha applies to Jessye’s life.

Bravery/Fear—Define bravery from Jessye’s point of view. Why does Jessye think that Mum has a brave side? How is Jessye brave? What is Nana’s brave side? How is Jessye less fearful when she is in Waimotu with Nana? At what point does Jessye realize that Adrian is to be feared? Explain why she feels she needs to talk to the taniwha. How does the feared taniwha make Jessye brave?

Hope—Nana tells Jessye, “Take a sour old thing and make it fresh and lively, like sweet lemonade.” (p. 7) Explain what this statement says about hope. Jessye tries to turn her life in Auckland into “sweet lemonade.” Discuss the moment her life turns to “lemons.” How does her experience with Mum and Adrian help her see that the real “hope” for her life is in Waimotu with Nana?

Forgiveness—Discuss what Nana teaches Jessye about forgiveness. What is the difference between forgetting and forgiving? Jessye says that she can never forget Mum and Adrian trying to take Nana’s land. Debate whether Jessye forgives Mum.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Language Arts—Jessye says, “I’d never have guessed that my destiny would be foreshadowed by a timber truck.” (p.12) Ask students to write a story that Jessye may have written in her notebook called “My Destiny.”

Write and illustrate a story about the taniwha for the younger children in Waimotu.

Social Studies—Have students research all aspects of the Maori culture. Then ask them to plan a seven-day trip for Americans who wish to travel to a rural village such as Nana’s in New Zealand. What will they see each day? Who will they meet? What type of accommodations can they expect? Describe the food and entertainment. Determine a total cost for the trip. What is the departure city in the U.S.? Where does the plane land in New Zealand? How do they travel to the village?

Art—Jessye is very good at art. While in school in Auckland, she learns to create things from recycled items. Have students create an artwork from “found or recycled materials” that Jessye might take to Nana when she returns to Waimotu.

Music—Music is very important in the Maori culture. The waiata tawhito are old songs that are chanted instead of sung. Ask students to discuss the difference between chanting and singing. Then divide the class into groups and ask them to prepare a chant

for one of the river songs in the novel. Each group should perform their chant for its class.

Science—Nana grows her own vegetables and some fruits. Ask students to research the fruits and vegetables that grow in New Zealand. When are they planted? Harvested? Make a small book like a Farmer's Almanac that records information for people who may be new to New Zealand.

Home Arts—Divide the class into groups and ask them to locate recipes for specific vegetables and/or fruits that grow in New Zealand. Ask the groups to find creative ways to present their recipes to the class (for example, they may include illustrations, or use Maori words to describe the dish). How many different recipes did the class locate?

Drama—Kapa Haka is the term for the traditional Maori performing arts. Ask students to read about this art form on the following website: www.maori.org.nz/waiata. Divide the class into groups and ask each group to perform a Kapa Haka for the class.

Vocabulary/Use of Language—There are many Maori words in the novel. Ask students to identify them and locate others at <http://www.nz.com/new-zealand/guide-book/language/maori/>. Then have them make a brief dictionary for travelers who plan to visit Waimotu.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Belinda Hollyer has compiled several acclaimed poetry collections for adults and children. She grew up in rural New Zealand, where her novel *River Song* is set. A former teacher, librarian, and publisher, she divides her time between London, England, and Key West, Florida.

Prepared by Pat Scales, retired school librarian and independent consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.