



Barrington Stoke

CLASSROOM RESOURCES



TORRENT!

Bernard Ashley

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PART I SYNOPSIS AND THEMES

SYNOPSIS AND THEMES

Tom is on holiday in the Alps. When the book opens, he is hiking alone and decides to go for a swim to cool off. He knows that it is dangerous to swim alone, and sure enough he discovers that the Blue Dam is full of melt-water and treacherously cold. He has to force his shocked and cramped body to the edge of the water. As he recovers, he notices the water has risen to cover a clump of the flowers known as drowned violas, growing on the bank. He knows that he is lucky to be alive, and afterwards is haunted by a vague idea that somehow he was helped out of the water by forces unseen.

The next morning, Tom is awoken by shouts of panic in the campsite. The Blue Dam has flooded and the water is pouring down to the campsite and beyond in an unstoppable torrent, bringing trees and rubble with it. Other campers are fleeing; the farmer who owns the site is taking any without transport in his truck. Tom races over to climb onto the truck but he trips and the farmer drives on before he can climb up. He realises that there are two miles to cover to the bridge across the river downstream, and that there is no time to run so far before the bridge is washed away by the torrent.

Tom knows there is no hope but begins to run anyway. Just then, a French girl appears on a moto and tells him to jump aboard. They race through the forest in a hair-raising attempt to escape the valley ahead of the flood-water. They reach the bridge with seconds to go. The momentum of the moto takes them on to the garden of a large house, where the other campers are gathered, and they tumble off.

When Tom recovers enough to take notice of his surroundings, the girl has gone. He asks for her, but the others tell him that he rode the moto in alone, and must be in shock. Just then, the farmer from the campsite begins to shout about the moto, which he says is his daughter's. Tom thinks he is angry, but the farmer thanks him for saving the moto, which was stored in a barn in the path of the flood-water. Tom tells him that his daughter saved his life, but the farmer becomes angry and thinks that Tom is mocking him. He tells Tom that his daughter died five years before. Tom asks what happened to her, but he already knows the answer – she died in the Blue Dam, over-powered by the cold. Her name was Viola. Drowned Viola.

Torrent is cleverly structured so as to be initially an adventure story but latterly transpire to be a ghost story. It is similar in structure to many urban legends.

PART 2 SUGGESTED QUESTIONS TO DEVELOP READING STRATEGIES

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Read the Note from Bernard Ashley.

What are the two events Bernard Ashley describes?

Bernard Ashley says:

‘For this book, I put these two ideas together’.

Does the group like the fact that Bernard Ashley’s note tells them a bit about what to expect when they read the book, or would they prefer for the story to come as more of a surprise?

Why/why not?

CHAPTER 1: A SWIM IN THE DAM

Read the first sentence

Why is Tom a fool to swim alone? Does the group understand the dangers of doing so? What other safety rules do they know for swimming?

Read up to ‘he had made it’ on P2

What sort of place is Tom visiting? Look for clues in the text.

Have any of the group experienced pain from extreme cold?

What does Bernard Ashley mean when he says ‘everything went black’? What is happening to Tom?

Read to the end of P4

Think back to the ‘Note from the Author’, which explained his inspiration for the story. What happens on **P4** that might be significant in terms of the plot?

Read to the end of the chapter

Why does the group think the name of the flowers is important? Does the name link to the action of the chapter?

Activities

Imagine that you run a holiday village in the Alps. **DESIGN AND DRAW** posters that warn people of the dangers of some of the activities in the area, such as swimming in the cold lake

water alone, or climbing the mountains without proper preparation.

Think about:

The activities you will feature on the poster

- o What are the rules of safe mountain climbing? (*always check the weather forecast, always make sure you have the proper maps, equipment, food, water and clothing, always make sure someone knows where you are going and when you are due back*)
- o What are the rules of safe swimming? (*don't swim alone, don't swim straight after a meal, check the temperature of water, check that the lake/sea is safe for swimming*)

The images you will use

- o Will you use diagrams of the things people should do, e.g. images of a map and a compass?
- o Will you use diagrams of the things people shouldn't do, e.g. a person climbing a mountain wearing shorts and a t-shirt?
- o Will you use any signs or symbols, e.g. ticks for good actions and crosses for wrong ones, or red circles with a line through them for dangerous activities?

The words you will use

- o Will you have a big title, like 'Be Prepared – Be Safe'?
- o Will you have questions like in adverts, e.g. 'Do you have warm clothing?' or 'Does someone know where you are going?'
- o Will you use headings and bullet points?
e.g. –

ALWAYS:

- o **plan your route**
- o **take food and water**
- o **take warm clothing**

CHAPTER 2: RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!

Read up to 'the damn is giving way' on P7

Who is speaking here?

Why does the group think that Bernard Ashley doesn't tell us who is speaking?

Read the rest of P7 up to 'racing to get away' on P9

Were the group's predictions of who was speaking on **P5** right?

Do they think they were right about why Bernard Ashley didn't say who was speaking? (*Bernard Ashley reports the speech as Tom hears it, and Tom has just woken up, is a bit confused and doesn't actually know who is shouting until he pokes his head out of his tent*).

Why is Tom especially confused when he wakes up?

Read the rest of P9 up to 'cars or bikes' on P11

What details on this page tell us that this is a very serious flood indeed?

Read the rest of P11 & P12 up to 'could reach it'

What is a 'torrent'?

Is the group shocked that the farmer drives the lorry away before Tom can reach it, after Tom trips on his tent peg? Why do they think the farmer does that?

Read to the end of the chapter

Does the group think Tom will make it? Why/why not?

Activities

CREATE A DISPLAY on serious floods.

RESEARCH using the internet. Use these headings:

- o Why do serious floods happen?
- o Some serious floods in the UK – places and dates.
- o Some serious floods around the world – places and dates.

CHAPTER 3: THE GIRL ON THE MOTO

Read P22

Why is the girl's speech a bit funny, e.g. 'River washes it away!'?

Read on to the end of the chapter

Describing things a character sees, hears, feels and thinks helps to make the reader feel like he or she is right in the middle of the story. Look for things Tom sees, hears and feels and thinks in this section.

Now recap the things that happened in this chapter.

Activities

MAKE A SOUND-SCAPE of rain and flooding water using hands on the desks. Begin by tapping fingernails and fingers and build up to banging with palms. Practice raising and lowering the sound to create storm effects, using a signal from the teacher such as a raised or lowered hand.

CHAPTER 4: RACE FOR THE GAP

Before you begin to read this chapter, can the group remember where Tom and the girl are headed, and why they must get there very fast?

Read the chapter right through first

Does the group think the chapter is exciting?

Ask volunteers to read **P26** aloud while the others make the sound-scape of the torrent in the background. The readers will have to read loudly to make themselves heard.

Look at P27 & P28 again

Does the group understand why the girl turns off the track? Why does the river follow the track?

Look at P26 to P30 again

Tom's mood changes a lot in these pages. Sometimes he feels horror. Sometimes he feels fear. Sometimes he feels excited. Look at each paragraph in turn and decide how Tom feels.

Read P31 & P32 again

Does the group think Tom and the girl will get to safety? Why/why not?

Activities

Pretend you are Tom. **RETELL** the events of the chapter in Tom's words. Use 'I' instead of 'Tom' when you are writing. Write about 10 sentences. Use the sentences in the chapter, and sentences of your own. Explain how you felt at different times.

CHAPTER 5: JUST!

Read P33

What does 'the dam had broken up' mean? How is a dam constructed? Look at pictures of water dams online if you are not sure.

Read P34 & P35 up to 'to race faster'

Why will Tom get extra speed by leaning forward over the girl and putting his hands over hers? *(Two ways – they will be more streamlined and he may be able to help get a little extra power out of the throttle, which is in the handlebars).*

Read the rest of P35 up to 'force of the water' on P37

What does the group think will happen next?

Read the rest of P37 to 'Just!' in P38

Measure out 20, 15, 10 and 5 yards in the corridor or schoolyard (1 yard = 91.44 centimetres). Take turns running these distances to get a feel for how far Tom and the girl must travel. Do the distances seem long to the class? Do they think they would seem long to Tom and the girl?

Read to the end of the chapter

What details on **P38 to P40** show us how terribly dangerous the flood-water is?

Activities

Working together in a **SHARED WRITING EXERCISE**, write a newspaper report on the flood. Remember to include:

- **A Headline**
Remember headlines are short and punchy and often cut out 'little words' like 'a' and 'the'
- **The Date**
- **Summary of the main content of the article in the first paragraph**
- **Witness statements.**

CHAPTER 6: VIOLA

Read the chapter title

Where have the group read the word 'viola' before? What do they think it might mean here?

Read up to the end of P43

Why do the group think the girl is not there?

Read P44 & P45

What does the group think is going on here? Did Tom ride into the garden alone? Is he in shock?

Read P46 up to 'a hurt face' on P47

Why does the group think that the farmer is at first sad, and then angry?

Read the rest of P47 up to 'left of her' on P48

Did any of the group guess that this was what the farmer was going to tell Tom?

Read the rest of P48 up to 'but he knew the answer'

What is he going to be told? Does the group know?

Read to the end

What does the group think of the ending? Did it send a chill down their spines?

Did the group expect the ending?

Can the group think of anything that happened earlier in the book that links into the ending (*the day after the near-drowning in the Blue Dam, Tom feels slightly odd, as though someone had helped him swim out of the water.*)

Activities

The story of **Torrent** is a little like an urban legend. Urban legends are stories which people swear are true but are likely not to be. They crop up in lots of different places, with different characters, but the same basic story.

There is a famous story about Lord Dufferin, who was Queen Victoria's Ambassador to France. The story is a little like the story of **Torrent**.

Once when he was on holiday in Ireland, Lord Dufferin woke up in the night and went to look out of the window. He saw a man walk across the garden carrying a coffin on his back. Lord Dufferin went out to see who the man was, but just as he walked up to him, the man vanished. Lord Dufferin saw his face very clearly, and said he was very ugly.

Years later, Lord Dufferin was in Paris, waiting for the lift in his hotel. When the lift arrived, he saw the face of the operator. It was the same man he had seen on that night in Ireland. Lord Dufferin was afraid, and did not get into the lift. The doors closed and the lift went down. Seconds later, the cable snapped and everyone inside the lift was killed. There was an investigation, but no one knew who the lift operator was – there was no record of him in the hotel.

Discuss the stories of **Torrent** and Lord Dufferin and the lift with the group. In both stories the ghost helps the person. Are the stories nice ghost stories? Or are they still scary, and creepy? Why?

IN SUMMARY

What sort of story is **Torrent** – an adventure story? A ghost story? A bit of both? Does the fact that it starts out as an adventure story make the ghost story more effective? Why/why not?

Did the group like **Torrent**?

Do they think it is believable?

Activities

CREATE A BOOK REVIEW of **Torrent**. Include the following:

- An outline of what happens in the book
- Information about the part(s) you liked best

- What you liked about the story
- What you didn't like about the story

Think about the different adjectives you could use to describe a book, or the different parts of a book, like 'exciting', 'scary', 'funny', 'interesting', 'action-packed' and so on.

PART 3 ABOUT BERNARD ASHLEY

Bernard Ashley was born in London and went to school in Blackheath and Rochester. He did National Service in the RAF and then became a teacher and a Head Teacher. He left teaching to become a full-time author.

Bernard has won the Other award, for his novel *The Trouble with Donovan Croft*, and has been short-listed for the Carnegie Medal and the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize. He has written over twenty novels, plus picture books, plays and scripts for TV.

Today Bernard lives in Charlton in South East London, only a street or so from where he was born. He is married to a former Head Teacher and they have three sons.