



# Teachers' Notes

## One Thousand Hills

James Roy & Noël Zihabamwe

Teachers' Notes by Rae Carlyle

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## Introduction

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Eleven-year-old Pascal lives in Agabande, Rwanda, and in 1994 this land of one thousand hills is his whole world. The people, the sounds, and the smells of the town and surrounding countryside are all familiar, predictable, and known. Playing with his friend Henri, arguing with his older brother, and helping his father in the garden, Pascal's days are full. But while Pascal spends his days as he always has, with school, church, family and friends the centre of his life, he senses that something is happening. His parents do not want him to listen to the radio, people are muttering things he does not understand, and the adults around him are suddenly acting in unpredictable ways. Rwanda – and Agabande – stand on the brink of a precipice. Hatred and fear are sweeping over the countryside, and what is about to happen will change Rwanda forever. Pascal and his family cannot escape the maelstrom; and as the undercurrents of terror rise to the surface, in one short night of horror and pain everything he knows is swept away.

Telling the story of the genocidal violence that consumed Rwanda, *One Thousand Hills* is a powerful and evocative account of events that are incomprehensibly horrific. Roy's prose paints a picture of a land that on the surface is both beautiful and serene, yet underneath, the population is filled with a seething unrest. Echoing the childhood experiences of Noël Zihabamwe, the novel is deceptive in the simplicity with which the young protagonist's story is told. Pascal's heartbreak, confusion, and the pain of his loss and of being utterly betrayed are shared with a clarity and sensitivity such that he and his story linger with the reader long after the book has been put down.

## About the Authors

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**James Roy** was born in New South Wales and spent much of his childhood in Papua New Guinea and Fiji. His books for young people include CBCA Honour Books *Captain Mack* and *Billy Mack's War*. *Town* won the Ethel Turner Prize in the 2008 New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards; *Anonymity Jones* won a 2010 Western Australian Premier's Book Award. James lives with his family in the Blue Mountains.

**Noël Zihabamwe** witnessed as a young boy the massacre of family and friends in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. He spent time in an orphanage before arriving in Australia. Having learnt English, he studied for and graduated with a Bachelor of Community Welfare and International Social Development and, since then, he has been active in community work and development in western Sydney.

# Activities

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## Before Reading the Text

*One Thousand Hills* is a beautifully written tale, with a protagonist who is still clearly a child. It is, however, a young adult novel more suitable for slightly older readers, and is set in a time and place where horrific events occurred. The literary merit of the novel is undeniable, and before introducing it to a class of young people it is important to be sensitive to the fact that younger readers, or students with traumatic events in their own personal history, might find the content challenging.

Before reading the book, it would also be of value to discuss, as a class, Rwanda and the Rwandan Genocide.

Some points to cover in at least general outline during the discussion might include:

- Where is Rwanda?
- What was the Rwandan Genocide?
- When did it occur?
- What part did racism play in it?
- Who were the victims?
- What had been happening in Rwanda in the lead up to the genocide – what were the events of the early 1990s that preceded such an extreme expression of hatred, bigotry and violence?

## Reading the Text

*One Thousand Hills* is a novel ideally suited to study as a whole-class exercise. Depending on the age and competence of the students, it can either be read aloud to a class or assigned as independent reading with frequent interludes involving whole-class discussions. The language used is evocative, the story itself is emotionally powerful, and the narrative is exquisitely constructed in terms of plot development and resolution. As a result most students will be readily engaged with the story when reading independently.

The subtleties of theme, the gradual explication of underlying conflicts, and the interleaving of past and present viewpoints mean that teacher-led group discussions at regular points throughout the course of reading the text should enhance the students' understanding of both the action in the novel and of the literary devices used.

## Plot Construction, Viewpoint, and Narrative Structure

*One Thousand Hills* consists of two distinct narratives, both featuring the character of Pascal. The first narrative that the reader encounters is written as a pure dialogue form. The physical layout of the text combined with the content of the characters' speech allows the reader to both infer the details of the setting and gain some understanding of the participants. There is no accompanying descriptive text or authorial voice to these sections, and the story is carried solely in the dialogue between sixteen-year-old Pascal and the counsellor to whom he is talking. The second narrative adheres to a more traditional western storytelling tradition, and is written from the perspective of Pascal when he was aged eleven.

The two narratives are differentiated by style and structure as well as being physically and chronologically separated from each other. The structure is both powerful and sophisticated. The dialogue sections are, apart from the very first opening scene, utterly dependent on the content of the sections set in Agabande. Reader comprehension of what is being discussed relies heavily on the action and events described as taking place five years earlier, while the dialogue that is interlaced throughout provides information akin to foreshadowing. Despite the increasingly obvious peril that Pascal and his family appear to be in in Agabande, the fact that he is clearly safe in Belgium five years later informs the reader's interpretation of what is likely to occur – in other words it is clear from the start that Pascal will survive. As such the dialogue sections also serve to provide a specific reprieve from the increasing tension levels of the action occurring in Agabande. However, it is important to note that despite this apparent relief from tension, they also contribute to the plot tension present within the novel as a whole.

### ***Points for Discussion/Activities***

The very first pages of any story serve the important function of setting the scene. They indicate to the reader where the action is happening, who is participating, and introduce the events of the story as a whole. After reading the first chapter of *One Thousand Hills*, discuss as a class what you, the readers, have learnt from this first scene.

- Where is this first scene set (time and place)?
- Who are the participants?
- What do we know about the two people participating in the conversation – what are their names, their roles, and their relationship to each other?
- Why is Pascal having the conversation – what events happened before the opening scene that led to him being part of the dialogue?
- How does Pascal describe how he is feeling now and how he felt before?
- What understanding from this first scene do you have of the character of the counsellor – what sort of person does he seem to be and what are his motivations?
- What are some of the benefits of writing a scene that consists purely of dialogue, and what are the limitations – why do you think the authors might have chosen to open the novel in this way, and what issues have they had to deal with in doing so?

The second scene in the novel is written in a very different form from the opening one, and describes events and daily life in a different country five years previously. After reading pages 6 through to 13 inclusive, as a class discuss the novel so far.

- What is described in these pages – what do you know about what will happen in the story from the narrative in this second section?
- In what ways does this section contrast to the opening dialogue? Make a list of all the points of difference that you can ascertain, and remember to include the obvious points as well as the more subtle features.
- Why might an author choose to include so much information about later events at an early point in a novel? What is the likely effect this will have on plot tension and reader involvement in the story?
- Based on the events described in the first dozen pages of the novel, what do you think is likely to happen in the rest of the book?

Throughout the novel tension levels gradually increase – but they do not do so in straight-line increments. After reading the novel, discuss the different levels of tension that can be found at various points and the role that variation in tension serves in maintaining reader attention.

- What is the point in the novel where the tension is greatest?
- What points have the least tension?
- On a timeline plot the tension levels from the first chapter until the end. (Note: this is a somewhat subjective exercise. Different readers will experience tension differently, but the overall pattern will be similar for all.)
- What is the role of the dual narratives within the novel in relation to tension levels?
- What purpose does altering tension levels throughout serve?
- What challenges does an author face when considering whether or not to include passages that increase or decrease tension – what decisions have the authors of *One Thousand Hills* made that deviate from classical narrative structure?
- Hypothesise as to the effect on the novel of passages of dialogue between sixteen-year-old Pascal and the school's counsellor that were not included.

The novel is written from the viewpoint of Pascal. As a class discuss the events of the novel from the perspective of the other characters. Individually, write an account of a scene from the point of view of Father Oscar, Henri, Nadine or Jean-Baptiste.

### Themes, Symbolism and Literary Devices

The most brutally obvious themes present within this novel are those of racism, betrayal, bigotry and violence, in counterpoint to the other themes featured of family, acceptance, love and belonging. The dual nature of the different themes is reflected on many different levels within the novel as a whole. The young Pascal's world is a place of friendship, trust, and loving family until shattered by forces beyond his understanding and control, yet even before his innocence is destroyed, obvious undercurrents of imminent disaster are present.

## ***Points for Discussion/Activities***

As a class discuss the various themes present within the novel.

- What different themes can you identify in the novel? Make a list detailing the most prominent themes.
- Many of the themes can be expressed as pairs of opposing natures, such as friendship and hatred, or bigotry and acceptance. What other themes from your list can be paired like this, and which ones cannot? Discuss why you think some themes can be paired and others cannot. What is the literary impact of choosing to emphasise a theme that is part of a dichotomous pair as opposed to a singular item?

The conversations between Pascal and the school counsellor take place five years after the main action of the novel, yet are distributed throughout the earlier narrative. This is, in and of itself, a specific literary device that also allows the authors to use other devices. As a class discuss the foreshadowing of the main action that can be found in the dialogue scenes, and how this impacts the reader. Some things to consider are:

- What do we learn from the dialogue between Pascal and the counsellor that is not contained in the main body of the text?
- What do we learn from the dialogue that is later expanded upon?
- How does knowing the broad outline of events prior to reading the details affect our interpretation of them?
- What is the purpose of foreshadowing as a literary device – and does the way the dialogue between Pascal and the counsellor is used to hint at events qualify as foreshadowing? Why/why not?

On page 6 of the novel, the first paragraphs contain many details about what happens to Pascal at the end of the main narrative. This was clearly a deliberate choice. As a class discuss this choice, and what purposes it serves. Some things to consider include:

- Why did the authors choose to introduce Agabande and Pascal's experiences in this way?
- What is the impression that the reader gains about the novel from this page?
- How might this structural choice enhance the impact of the novel on the reader?
- What specific motifs, themes, and ideas are in these first sections that are then echoed later on in the book?

The introductory passages up to page 13 set the tone of the novel and also introduce several important facts about young Pascal and his life and beliefs that have powerful symbolic relevance to him and his story.

After reading the novel, as a class reread pages 6 to 13 and discuss how your interpretation of these pages is different after reading the entire novel than it was the first time you encountered it.

Some other things to consider in your discussion are:

- What is the symbolism of the bells, and why is it so important – what emotions do the bells evoke at the end of the novel, and how does this contrast to their initial presentation as symbolically important in Pascal's life?
- What is the message given by the description of the priests sharing their milk, and how does this contrast to the image of the priests we have at the end of the novel?
- Why might the authors have chosen to stress how everyone in Pascal's family dressed on Sunday to go to church – what is the important information conveyed in these words that on a first reading seems to have no great import?
- What things did you not notice the first time you read these pages that you now realise are central to Pascal's story?

## Characterisation

Character development is of vital importance in any story. Without an understanding of the characters, of their motivations, and their natures, a story will not fully unfold. *One Thousand Hills* is no exception to this, and it is through the reader's increasing understanding of the characters that they understand how the interactions between them all drive events.

Character development is also integral to the development of reader empathy. As more is revealed about the different participants in the action, so can the reader more easily understand why a particular character might react as they do, and can predict possible future responses.

Because it is written primarily from the perspective of Pascal, in *One Thousand Hills* character development is predominantly driven through the interactions characters have with Pascal and his perceptions and interpretation of events.

### ***Points for Discussion/Activities***

Most of the major characters and participants in the novel have been introduced to the reader within the first dozen or so pages of text, and we have some understanding of who they are and the roles that they play in Pascal's life. After reading the novel to the end of page 13, as a class discuss the characters that have been introduced so far.

- In small groups choose one of the characters introduced in these early pages, and write a brief character summary.
- In your summary you should include information about the character's name, their age, their relationship to Pascal, the role they play in his life, and any other distinguishing features or characteristics that they possess.
- Include an assessment of what sort of person you think that the character is – what impression of them have you gained at this point in the novel?

By the end of the novel many of the characters have become more fully developed than they were at the outset.

- After reading the book, write a second character summary about your chosen character from the previous exercise.
- As a class discuss the differences – or lack of differences – between students' two summaries, and why they are either different or the same.

Pascal's understanding of Father Oscar and Father Michel, and his opinion of the characters, undergoes enormous change during the course of the novel.

- What are the various impressions he has of them over time?
- How and why do these impressions change?

## After Reading the Text

### **Group Responses**

*Everyone in the world heard about what was happening in Rwanda, but they didn't do anything. Nothing. They just let it happen.* (p. 229)

During the Rwandan Genocide in 1994, there was no meaningful intervention from the international community or the United Nations. As a class discuss ways in which the international community could have responded to the situation, how they have responded in other times and places in the past, and how they might potentially respond in the future if similar circumstances arise somewhere. Include in your class analysis a discussion of the authors' note on pages 231 to 232 and the information included in it.

The last line in the novel where Pascal states *I have all the time in the world* is a direct echo of the school counsellor's statement in the very first section, where he is asking Pascal to talk about his younger years and the experiences that left him with a negative opinion of priests.

- As a class discuss what this sentence conveys, both literally and figuratively, the two times it is uttered.
- Include in your discussion how your knowledge of the different characters influences your interpretation of its meaning and symbolic relevance.
- Hypothesise as to the effect the authors were trying to achieve by using this phrase to bracket the body of the novel.

*One Thousand Hills* is a moving story with a powerful message describing horrific and traumatic events. As a class or in small groups discuss your personal emotional response to this story. Include in your discussion how you felt during and after the novel, and which sections you found the most emotionally challenging or evocative. Individually write a poem or short story that, in your opinion, embodies your emotional response to the novel.



## ***Individual Analyses***

Traditional narrative structure, in its simplest form, consists of a tripartite structure involving the three features *setting*, *complication* and *resolution*. In more sophisticated works this structure is often repeated throughout the course of the action, with subplots embedded within the larger structure. In what ways does the narrative structure of *One Thousand Hills* adhere to this basic structure, and in what ways does it vary from the standard? Analyse the narrative structure of *One Thousand Hills*, hypothesising as to the authors' rationale for choosing to use this structure. Include in your answer both examples from the text and a commentary on the effect of the narrative structure on the reader's comprehension of the plot and understanding of character motivation.

Most of the characters within the novel are developed purely in terms of their relationship to Pascal. Compare and contrast Jean-Baptiste to Henri, discussing the similarities and differences in how they relate to Pascal, and the importance of their actions and roles in the formation of Pascal's world-view and character.

The character of Jean-Baptiste embodies within his actions many of the themes that can be found in the novel as a whole. Discuss the various ways in which the events within the novel can be seen as a twisted and horrific reflection of the interactions between Jean-Baptiste and Pascal.

Most of the people involved in the genocide and violence are seen by Pascal as shadowy and menacing strangers, but some were people he counted as friends as well as neighbours. In your opinion does the fact that Henri's father and Father Oscar both attempted to help Pascal make their involvement in the genocide and in killing many other people more horrific, or less? Include in your argument an analysis of their possible motivations for participating, and for choosing to not harm Pascal. Support your points with evidence drawn directly from the text.

What is Pascal's opinion of the counsellor with whom he is having a conversation, and how do the authors convey this information – what in Pascal's speech gives the reader the idea that this is Pascal's opinion? Include in your answer evidence from the text to support your argument.