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WHERE THE ROCK SPLITS THE SKY

BY PHILIP WEBB

SYNOPSIS

In a land where it is permanently dusk, Megan wonders what it would have been like for her all those years ago, when the Earth still spun on its axis. Hotly pursued by the mysterious 'Jethro Gang', Megan, her horse Cisco, and her best friend Luis, head off to track down Megan's missing father, who is thought to have disappeared in the Zone – a vast area in the American Mid-West in which machines no longer work, whole towns defy gravity, and invisible forces have a strangle hold on the inhabitants. It is also a hotspot for the Visitors. With only her father's old hand-scribbled map to guide their way (and going against the advice of her aunt), Megan and Luis enter this strange, fearsome environment.

It's not long before they come across Kelly, a feisty girl and inhabitant of the town of Valentine – found by Megan and Luis floating above the ground! Kelly, along with the whole town it seems, has been catapulted forward to this point from some time in the past; probably coinciding with Visitation Day – the day the Visitors first came to Earth. With Kelly in tow, the three make their way through the Zone, encountering an array of characters, each in their own way affected by conditions in the Zone. Some turn to gambling and deceit, others fall foul of the tides of sleeping sickness that pin them to one particular spot, and others may be ... just may be ... Visitors in disguise.

Using the tracking skills passed down from her father, and listening to the 'quivers' she is attuned to, Megan negotiates this hostile terrain in order to find her father. But, unbeknown to her, Megan is also racing toward her date



with destiny, one that will reveal the truth about who she really is.

WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

This is an astonishing novel. Just read it. OK, I'll tell you a little about it.

With a tethered earth, floating towns and rivers of sand, it's a thrilling sci-fi Western. But at its heart is true friendship in the face of peril.

And did I say brilliant? Extraordinary and like nothing else I've read? Philip Webb is a god (no, that's not a clue!).

BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Philip Webb had a happy childhood, roaming, exploring and playing out post-apocalyptic adventures with his friends. He was born in 1967 and now lives with his wife in West London. He has a computer science degree and a Masters in human computer interaction and works in the IT industry as a User Experience Consultant. His interests include travel, art, design and film.

Six Days, published in 2010, was Philip Webb's debut novel for children and his second book for Chicken House, *Where the Rock Splits the Sky* was published in Spring 2014.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

"In 1991 I took a road-trip through the US mid-west and was blown away. I saw first-hand the spectacular country that provides the backdrop for some classic Westerns. 20 years later, my old diaries of the trip helped inspire Where the Rock Splits the Sky. Megan's Wild West is a reimagining of those real places I travelled to - where the sun never sets, towns can float, and body-snatchers are the new outlaws.



I needed a seed idea, a big idea that would drive the plot. And that came to me from a friend who talked about this plan to tow huge oil tankers or large ships across the oceans purely through wind power, so that they were being towed by these enormous kites, up to 50,000 square feet – the size of a football field basically. I wanted to take that idea further. How far could I possibly take that idea? I came up with the idea of an entire planet, planet Earth, being towed. It's an idea that sparks off lots of other ideas, and also some big questions. So, the consequences were interesting to me. If the planet was being towed somewhere then it necessarily has to stop spinning; which means that there would be a light side and a dark side – like the moon. And some of the big plot questions would be, 'Who is towing this planet?', 'Where are they going, and for what reason?' So that was the seed idea.

There are lots of other influences. Lots of books and films. Lots of Westerns and lots of science fiction films. There was one film which had the deepest influence. It's by a Russian director called Andrei Tarkovsky, and the film is called Stalker. It's quite slow, but it really stuck with me and lodged in my imagination. The thing that really strikes me about it is how visually beautiful it is. It's set in the wilderness of Russia, an apocalyptic area referred to as 'The Zone', and there are these characters, the 'stalkers', and only they have the skills and courage to navigate it." **PHILIP WEBB, AUTHOR**

THEMES

- Abduction
- Friendship
- Destiny
- Loyalty
- Pursuit

WRITING STYLE

Where the Rock Splits the Sky is an exciting science fiction adventure story, set against the backdrop of post-apocalyptic Mid-West America. The writing is richly descriptive and reflective, and depicts a world in which the



laws of physics and morality defy convention. There is a strong emphasis on the development of friendships and trust, with the main characters facing moral dilemmas and perilous situations. There are a couple of moments in the novel that some readers may find upsetting. 33 chapters, 266 pages, age 12+.

PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1: Where My Story Begins

Where the Rock Splits the Sky begins with Megan planning her journey into the Zone, and Luis shoeing Cisco in preparation. We don't meet Kelly (one of the principle characters in the story) until page 43. The circumstances in which Megan and Luis discover Kelly – with her hometown, Valentine, floating in mid-air, and Kelly herself having no clue she has entered the Zone, or even that the town has been *missing* for many years – are very peculiar. The first meeting between these three characters is, to say the least, an unusual one. Arguably, Kelly's personal experience (from her working a shift in the Taco-Shack-O to the realisation her town has jumped through space and time and is now floating mid-air) is even more remarkable than Megan and Luis's discovery of this misplaced town in the first place. Consequently, it would be interesting for us to hear about Kelly's personal journey up to page 43 in the novel. Just as Megan narrates the action leading up to this point, Kelly could narrate an intriguing tale of her own, detailing the events that lead to her meeting her two new friends. In this way, pupils could be tasked with providing an alternative beginning to *Where the Rock Splits the Sky*, with Kelly as the narrator. The bit where Kelly discovers her town is hanging in the sky would certainly be a fun challenge!

2: The Genre Mash-up

Philip Webb's novel is, amongst other things, a fusion of different genres; notably, the Wild West and science fiction. This mix of styles helps the author create a world that defies convention, one that opens up endless possibilities for him to explore in his writing. Similarly, pupils could be tasked with creating a narrative in which different genres collide. Of course, it may be necessary to provide some pupils with background



understanding of the term 'genre', and the typical elements of different genres, but it would be interesting for pupils to work in groups to produce a genre fusing narrative of their own making. Perhaps pupils could be asked to pick two genre types from a hat containing a broad range of genres. It could be good for pupils to demonstrate their understanding of genre, and to show the possibilities of mixing genres together, by creating a visual trailer for their idea – something that resembles a film promo, or perhaps one of the Chicken House book trailers (www.doublecluck.com).

3: Objects of Destiny

In the chapter 'Burial Grounds', Megan comes across three objects in what is supposed to be her father's grave: a knife and a pair of moccasins, wrapped in an Old Glory flag. Although they mean little to Megan at the time, what she finds turns out to be useful in the coming chapters. This idea can be used as a catalyst for creative writing, in which pupils are tasked with creatively incorporating a number of objects into a piece of fiction. Pupils can decide on how the objects figure in their tale, but it might be better if they were used as plot drivers, as opposed to being included in an arbitrary way. The objects could be chosen by the pupils; however it may test their abilities further if the objects are assigned to them or are picked from a hat. On the whole, the more varied the objects, the better!

4: Mapping the Zone

When Megan grabs her Rand McNally map of the Zone before she ventures in pursuit of her father, she hopes to be able to use it to navigate her way through an area that defies logic – with floating towns and land rivers rife. It is perhaps only when she opens the piece of paper left for her by her father that she gains any idea about what the Zone might actually look like. In the end, it is this she uses to work out what she needs to do once she enters the Zone. What we learn about the map from Megan's description is that it bears only a vague resemblance to the way it looked before Visitation Day, but that it now includes some very distinct features. Using this as motivation, pupils could be tasked with mapping their own 'Zones' – using current maps of their own local area as a starting point.



Pupils could devise a way of mapping over these local maps with features they might expect to see if the Zone ever took over their area. Pupils could be encouraged to think about what particular features might be important to map, in order that others could navigate this new Zone. Perhaps some previously innocuous features of the current map may now take on new significance, with bus routes becoming paths of safe passage, or the site of the school a place where the sleeping sickness might overcome a passer-by. In each case, it would help if pupils developed a narrative to go alongside their map; one that they could talk through with the rest of the class when prompted. In this way, the exercise becomes about using map-making as a form of storytelling, as well as an opportunity for pupils to develop a deeper understanding of the features and techniques of map-making.

5: And Now, The End of the World ... Live

The events of Visitation Day are not documented in any great detail by Megan. After all, she hadn't even been born by this point! Whatever happened, we can be quite sure the events of that day would have been very confusing and frightening for the people who would have lived through it. Many people, we can assume, would have been turning to the television or radio to help them make sense of what was unfolding. With this in mind, it would be interesting for pupils to think about what these broadcasts might consist of. What information would they be able to give out? Would they be conducting interviews with people who have seen things? Would they have a reporter 'on the ground'? Would they have experts discussing what they think has happened? Or, would they have their broadcast interrupted by the events unfolding? All this would provide great inspiration for a drama, with the pupils playing the parts of the journalists, interviewers and members of the public who are going through it all. It may even be worthwhile introducing Orson Welles' radio adaptation of *War of the Worlds* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsOK4ApWl4g>) to the pupils, who may be inspired by this to develop some ideas about how to make their broadcast drama seem authentic, and maybe even delivered in 'real time'. Another, more modern example of this kind of real-time drama is 'Without Warning' (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9xMTA7qhZM>).



6: Persuasion

When the travellers reach Carlsbad, they are met with a frosty reception. Arguably, it is only Luis's quick thinking and ability to produce a powerful sermon on demand that saves them from a lynching. With this in mind, pupils could be encouraged to think about how they can best influence others through their words and actions. A drama activity could be set up that asks pupils to use their powers of persuasion to convince others to make certain choices in a given time period. For example, pupils could act as representatives for different schools of thinking on a number of different topics, and will need to persuade their peers to adopt the viewpoint they are espousing. This could take the form of a debate on a hot topic in the local area, or perhaps a more trivial matter. It could even be an argument made from the point of view of one of the characters in the novel. Pupils could compete against one another to see who can get the greatest amount of people to come around to their way of thinking.

WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Where the Rock Splits the Sky* is a present tense, first person narrative. What does this do to the way you experience the story. Do you think it would be the same story if it was told from a different perspective (perhaps a past tense, third person narrative)? Why?
2. For Megan and the others who live in or near the Zone, the world is in perpetual twilight. How would this affect you? Are there any pros and cons of living like this? If so, what would they be? What would be the benefits and problems associated with time being frozen at other times of the day? Which would you favour and why?
3. What do you think Megan means when she talks about her 'quivers'? Do you believe in such an ability? Could some people be more susceptible to feeling 'quivers' than others?
4. What do you understand about 'tracking' and 'setting up a perimeter'? Is this a technique that can only be employed in the American Mid-West? How might such a technique be useful in your own life?

