



The Edge of Light: New Dawning

by A.M Dixon

Synopsis of novel

Recently graduated from high school, aged 15, and beginning her apprenticeship as a scientist, Merel starts to question some of her basic assumptions about the society she lives in. Her world is limited to a small island created by a climate crisis separating Lyttleton and the Port Hills from the mainland. To mitigate ongoing global warming, the land is shielded from the sun's heat by covers, leaving humanity and all of nature living in semi darkness.

Merel has always been a reserved and law-abiding youngster, living with her scientist parents and much younger brother. Only now is she beginning to question and rebel. As she does so, she discovers her best friend Ren is perhaps more of a dissident than she had ever imagined, a truth that ends up creating major problems for her.

Her relationship with Ren is complicated by dawning sexual and romantic attraction to her childhood friend, causing her to question and doubt her reactions. The reader is drawn into this complex first-person narrative, sharing Merel's self-doubt and questions. Before long, like Merel, the reader no longer knows whether Ren is what he claims to be, whether Merel's parents are as law-abiding as they claim to be, and whether anyone in authority over this community can be trusted.

As it is the first in a trilogy, there is no resolution to any of these questions, leaving the reader eager for the next instalment of Merel's tale. As a class teaching text, this of course opens great possibilities for writing tasks allowing students to explore where they think the story might go.

About the author

Melanie Dixon is an award-winning short story writer, novelist, poet and creative writing tutor at the School for Young Writers and Hagley Writers Institute, and is a volunteer fire-fighter in her local community on Banks Peninsula. She writes adult literary fiction, contemporary fiction, and fantasy for younger readers, and been published and anthologised internationally in collections such as Best Small Fictions, Best Microfiction, and We are New Zealand.

Themes / issues

This first book in a trilogy exploring those perennial topics of friendship, coming of age, abuse of power, and who to trust, gradually reveals to the reader that all is not as it seems in this microcosm of post apocalyptic NZ. All of these are excellent starting points for a novel study. What is different is the role of the Voice of the Child, a clear reference to the work of young climate activists in our current context. This provides a platform for a different sort of thematic study, as it both alludes to the importance of listening to young people, but also shows how this can become corrupted and manipulated, once it is institutionalised.

Writing style

The novel is told in the first person through Merel's eyes, in the present tense. This creates an immediacy and strong connection with Merel as the narrator. With the use of a new form of teenage slang, relevant to the different context, and the effective sustained use of a present tense narrative, there is great scope for a language study emerging from this text.

Another interesting element of the writing is the incorporation of exposition within the dialogue, overcoming one of the main challenges of a present tense narrative elegantly and effectively.

Year level suitability and application

Both in terms of the age of the protagonist and the themes and issues this text would be most suitable for a Year 10 audience, with an appropriate level of complexity for that age. The opportunities for language study referred to above, however, might also make this a suitable novel to tie into the new Level 1 Language in Context Achievement Standard.

Learning opportunities

Before reading:

Prior knowledge discussion / activities:

- Research project on youth climate activism
- Research on the effects of climate change and sea level rise
- Cross-disciplinary project on the importance of sunlight for flora and fauna. Students could make their own predictions about what would be necessary to sustain life artificially, if sunlight were to be significantly reduced.
- In a society where you were allocated a career, rather than being able to choose, what do you think you would end up doing? Why is this? Would you be content with that?

During reading: Understanding the content

Questions/tasks can be assigned chapter by chapter, or as one or more worksheets during or after reading. Many are relevant as individual written reflection OR as class/group discussion topics.

Chapter 1:

1. List everything you learn about the society in which this novel is set in the first chapter.
2. What questions are you left with after reading Chapter 1?

Chapters 2 - 4:

3. EITHER describe the walk back from the Fire from Ren's perspective OR describe the incident with the bullies from Estelle's perspective.
4. Write an imaginary section of the novel, explaining what Ren does at the docks that night. Decide for yourself whether or not Merel joins him.
5. How does the conversation about "mythical" animals raise questions about the relationship between science and conspiracy theories?
6. Write Bexley's diary entry about the evening. What is he crying about? What can't he say to his sister about his fears and feelings?

Chapters 5 - 6:

7. When the Principal Scientist is described (pg 73) we are given some clues that Albany's claim about lands where the sun shines are not total madness. What are those clues?
8. Bexley says "I want to watch, but I don't want to watch. I don't know what I want." Describe a time when you have felt this conflicted about something. How does it help you to understand what Bexley is experiencing?
9. List the reasons Ren might have for being at the docks early in the morning?
10. In this chapter it becomes clear that send-off is a euphemism. What is really happening and why?

Chapters 7 - 8:

11. "It's almost like she has been chosen to speak for adults." What questions does this statement raise about the role of the Voice of the Child and how it is being used in a time of change or challenge?
12. What questions are raised about the relationship between the Voice and the Council in the conversation between Estelle and Merel?
13. Write an imaginary extra chapter, describing what Ren has been doing all week. Use the hints given in this chapter and earlier to guide you. Create a play with a partner, depicting the conversation between Ren and Estelle, showing something of the feelings and thoughts that are being hinted at, but not expressed.

Chapters 9 - 12

14. 'It's just, these decisions should be based on scientific fact, not on trying to make people happy. It's not the right motivation, doing it like this ...' Debate with a partner: The ends justify the means (basing your arguments on this situation)
15. Merel feels that she has brought about the opening of the covers. Imagine you were in her position. What would you have asked Estelle to do?

16. In the story of the Flood, Estelle summarises what is happening in our contemporary society. Create a diagram or visual representation of the relationship between consumerism and the “child prophets” and “rebels”. Who do you think these two groups are?
17. Write Bexley’s perspective OR perform the scene where Bexley describes what happened at the Fire to their parents.
18. What is the difference between being part of history and part of the future?

Chapters 13 - 15

19. Outline the social hierarchies in this society.
20. Write Gina Edward’s diary entry as the authorities persecute her for the discoveries she is making.
21. Merel faces a huge dilemma when she realises she can’t report the finding of the new bird. Outline what the issues she faces are. What choice would you have made?

Chapters 16 – 18

22. Write what you imagine the rest of the conversation between Simeon and Dunyel is.
23. Who do you think might be at Ren’s home? What are your reasons for thinking that?
24. Write or perform Ren’s internal thoughts when he decides to go with Merel.

Chapters 19 – 21

25. Write a paragraph explaining why the writer built tension through the mad race and finding the bird dead.
26. Write a letter from the school principal to Bexley’s parents, explaining why he needs to be held back at school.
27. Bexley’s questions show us that Merel has not thought about the consequences of her actions. How would you solve the problems she has created for herself?

Chapters 22 – 23

28. Merel constantly focuses on how vulnerable and scared Estelle is. What evidence do we have that this is not the only way to perceive her?
29. What is the significance of Estelle failing to end the story in the conventional manner?
30. The particular song of the ghost-bird has been mentioned many times. Why does it have such an impact at this moment?

Chapters 24 – 27

31. What is the significance of Corvus returning the bracelet to Ren?
32. Was Merel right to believe Dunyel? Or Estelle? What would you have done in her situation?
33. How does Dixon help us to experience Merel’s confusion and uncertainty?
34. What is the purpose of Estelle convincing Merel that they are stowing away?

Chapter 28

35. Why is the realisation that the Scientists control the weather so devastating for Merel?
36. Do you think Estelle is genuinely trying to help Merel? Stage a debate with a friend to explore the different arguments.

Post reading: Taking it further

Setting:

Study a map of Lyttleton and Christchurch, then read the various place descriptions in the novel. Draw what you think Littleton town and the surrounding landscape looks like, including Ōtautahi Strait.

Discussion: Is this a realistic depiction of what would happen if sea levels rise? Why do you think the writer created this uncertainty about place?

The pigeons are surveillance drones. How does the danger of constant surveillance change the nature of the society in which this novel is set?

Characters:

How does the writer make Simeon appear unlikeable from the very beginning?

What makes us unsure about whether Ren can be trusted or not?

The story is narrated by Merel. What do we learn about how others see her?

How many things do we later come to think she might have got wrong? How does that change the way we see the story?

Ren claims not to regret any of it. Is this helpful under the circumstances?

Divide into groups and explore the motivations of each character. Then present a play justifying a specific decision made by your character.

Themes/Discussion points:

What do these quotes tell us about the way this society operates?

- ‘There’s no point in worrying about things you don’t need to know.’
- Ren is definitely clever, he’s great with people, but he doesn’t know a lot about science.
- I know he feels self-conscious about being a Messenger among Scientists.
- “We don’t have any choice. We all know what happens to people who challenge the Council.”

How do these quotes relate to issues in our society today?

- It's strange that some Scientists like Mum and Dad are excited about the Covers opening, and yet others seem so worried about it. Surely, they would have some kind of consensus.
- Instead of listening to stories, they watched the pictures the Government fed them. They thought they were being told the truth, but they weren't. At least, that's what the Histories tell us.'
- Extinction. It's such a strange concept. I can't believe people didn't do more back then. They were too blind to see what was happening. At least that is what we have been told. There must have been some people who noticed, though, some people who cared. Surely.

Does the fear of certain death justify betraying your friend?

- 'But if I'd stayed, I'd only have seven years.' Estelle looks baffled by my anger. 'I thought this would be more of an adventure.'
- It seemed like a chance to do something exciting. To be part of the future.'

Everyone has a distinct job and knows a lot about it. Is this sort of specialisation a good thing or not?

Is it worth experiencing something extraordinary, if you can't share that with anyone else?

What is the background to the "Voice of the Child"? What do we learn about the reasons it was implemented? The Voice is executed before they reach adulthood. What does this suggest about the inability of adults to truly allow children a voice?

This is the first book in a trilogy. Before you read the first chapter of the second book, write your own version of what might happen next.

Throughout this novel, we do not really know the motivations of any character, other than Merel. What questions does this raise about how we decide whom to trust? In groups, create presentations that show how each of the following characters is genuinely doing their best for the society. Then present the opposite point of view and show how they are manipulating Merel and others for their own purposes:

- Ren
- The Mayor
- Carla Foster
- Donyel
- The Principal Scientist

Language:

Identify the ways in which language is used that shows us or makes us think about:

- This novel is set in NZ
- This novel is set in a very different NZ to the one we know
- The social organisation of this society
- The importance of Science in this society
- The conflict between science and mythology

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