

RANDOM HOUSE TEACHERS' RESOURCE KIT

The Nature of Ash

Mandy Hager

Ash McCarthy thinks he finally has it made, revelling in the freedom of student hostel life. But life takes a devastating turn when two police officers knock on his door.

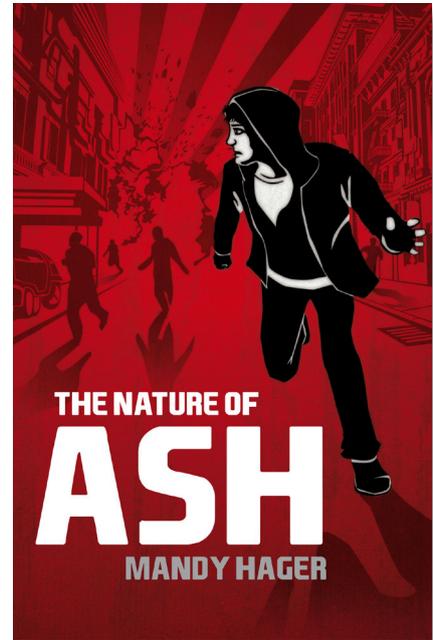
Their life-changing news forces him to return home and impels him into a shady world of political intrigue, corruption, terrorism and lies . . . so many lies.

As if this isn't bad enough, the whole country is imploding, as the world's two greatest super-powers start a fight that leaves New Zealand 'piggy-in-the-middle' of their deadly games. While trying to protect his brother Mikey, along with strangers Travis and Jiao, his fight to uncover the truth turns into a nightmare race to save their lives.

The Nature of Ash is a fast-paced thriller that explores love and loss, assumptions and prejudices, truth and fiction, and the many faces of 'family'.



Mandy Hager is a Wellington writer and educator. She won the Esther Glen Medal for Fiction in 2008 with her novel *Smashed*, and the 2010 NZ Post Children's Book Award for Young Adult Fiction for *The Crossing*.



SPECIFICATIONS:

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Extent: 361pp
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RESOURCE KIT CONTAINS:

- Before reading
- Language
- Characters
- Themes
- Comprehension questions
- Creative responses

Price (GST inclusive) and author details are correct at the time of writing but are subject to change without notice. Visit www.randomhouse.co.nz for up-to-date information.

Before reading

1. What does the cover picture indicate about the book's content?
2. When and where might the story be set?
3. What does the title suggest to you?
4. Read the author's dedication (p. 5). If you wrote a book, who would you dedicate it to and what would the dedication say?
5. Where is the quote on p. 7 taken from? Why do you think the author chose it? What is its significance? Answer these questions again once you have read the book.

Language

1. What do you think the genre of this book is? List the aspects that are indicative of this genre.
 - 'lynch mob' (p. 128)
 - 'in limbo' (p. 128)
 - 'rednecks' (p. 129)
 - 'tiki tour' (p. 146)
 - 'blow her stack' (p. 174)
2. The story is told in the first person. Why do you think the author chose to do this? Was it effective? Choose a passage in the book and rewrite it in third person narrative.
3. Figurative language is used to convey ideas that might otherwise be difficult to express. Two examples of figurative language are similes and metaphors. 'He flaps his arms like a windmill' (p. 11) is an example of a simile and 'His tone is razor sharp' (p. 209) is an example of a metaphor. Find more examples of each type of figurative language from the book.
4. The author uses symbolism in the book. What are the phrases below typically symbolic of? What is the origin of these phrases?
 - 'sabre-rattling' (p. 10)
 - 'straight-laced' (p. 10)
 - 'six feet under' (p. 65)
 - 'heading for the hills' (p. 68)
 - 'turncoat' (p. 91)
 - 'sitting ducks' (p. 124)
5. The author uses personification to describe elements of nature. For example, 'Outside, the sun is setting, its orange fingers reaching back towards the clouds' (p. 123). Using personification, write a poem or descriptive paragraph about other forces of nature.
6. AKA, WA and UK (p. 8) are examples of what figure of speech? Find more examples of this figure of speech from the book.
7. Ash makes a pun about the UPR (pp 126–127). Think of three other examples of puns.
8. Jiao's father says, 'Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves' (p. 74) and Ash's father writes in his letter, 'From caring comes courage. Kia kaha' (p. 109). Is there a difference between a saying and a proverb? What do these sayings or proverbs mean? Where do they come from? Think of five other common sayings or proverbs and research them using these questions.

9. The author uses animal imagery in some similes. For example, 'about as scary as three wetas facing off a hawk' (p. 10) and 'he shrieks like a demented gibbon' (p. 57). Find other examples from the book. Then think of ten other animals and create a simile for each.
10. What is the literary definition of 'pathetic fallacy'? Find a moment in the novel where it is evident.
11. 'Brainwave' (p. 192) is an example of a blend or portmanteau word. What does this mean? Who invented the figure of speech 'portmanteau'? Find examples of some more blend words.
12. What figure of speech are the words 'smash' and 'bang' (p. 216) examples of? Find five more examples from the book. Write a poem or descriptive paragraph which includes these words.
13. Describe in a paragraph how the tension builds and falls away during the book. Find a passage in the novel that is high-intensity, and another which is low-intensity. Copy both out and compare the language used (choice of words, length of sentences, the pace at which details are revealed). How is language used to create intensity?
14. Find definitions for the following words from the novel and write one sentence for each:
 - adamant (p. 103)
 - acquiesce (p. 115)
 - cathartic (p. 120)
 - pontificating (p. 161)
 - altruistic (p. 168)
 - ominous (p. 168)
 - entropy (p. 170)
 - magnanimous (p. 183)
 - vindictive (p. 185)
 - feral (p. 192)
 - touché (p. 194)
 - lucid (p. 273)

Characters

1. Think of three adjectives to describe Ash, Mikey, Jiao, Travis, Erich and Grace.
2. List the qualities of Ash's personality and find examples of when he displays each of these qualities.
3. Choose an important event from the novel and describe Ash's reaction to it.
4. What do you think Ash learns in this book? How do you think he has changed by the end of the book? How do you think his view of himself has changed?
5. How does the relationship between Ash and Jiao develop through the book? What are the main events which contribute to the development?
6. What are the different pressures on Ash throughout the novel? What factors lead to the decisions he makes and how does he cope with the situations he finds himself in?
7. What does the novel say about friendships and/or family and their importance during difficult times? List examples of episodes when friends and/or family are either a help or a hindrance to Ash.
8. Do you think Ash is a realistic character? Why or why not?
9. Draw a picture of one of the characters based on their physical descriptions. You might choose one of the following:
 - Jiao (p. 19)
 - Grandma (p. 98)
 - Lucinda Lusch (p. 101)
 - Erich (p. 169)
 - Grace (p. 212)
10. Write a character summary of Ash, Mikey, Dad, Lucinda, Jiao, Travis or Jeannie.
11. Which character did you particularly like or dislike? Why?
12. Which character do you most identify with? Why?

Themes

Discuss the following themes and find examples from the book which illustrate each.

- the chaos of war
- grief and loss
- treatment of vulnerable citizens, such as the elderly or disabled
- bigotry and racism
- the abuse of human rights
- betrayal and the corruption of power
- government control
- the definition and importance of family relationships
- teenage sexuality and attraction
- responsibility, such as individualism versus social duties

Comprehension questions

1. What is Ash's initial reaction to the arrival of police (p. 11)? What does it tell us about his family circumstances?
2. What does the fact that only the rich can afford to fly tell us about the state of New Zealand and the world (p. 16)?
3. Why do you think the author capitalised the sentence 'Be A Man' (p. 28)? Was it effective? Why?
4. Why does Ash mention that the fact that Jiao is Asian 'only makes things worse' (p. 35)? Do you think his prejudice or racism is justified given the circumstances?
5. Why does Ash agree to take Mikey to see his Dad (p. 38)? What are the repercussions of this decision?
6. Why is Mr Prakeesh so good with Mikey (p. 44)?
7. What effect does Mikey embracing their dad have on Ash — both emotionally and physically (p. 46)?
8. Why do you think Ash would not admit to his friends down south that he's good at baking cakes (p. 55)?
9. What can Mikey do 'without even trying' (p. 66)? At what other times during the book is his skill useful?
10. What does Jiao mean when she calls her parents 'human shields' (p. 76)? Do you think she is correct?
11. What does Ash learn from Jiao about the UPR's 'one-child policy' (p. 76)? How does it change his view of her?
12. What effect does Ash think the inability to access the internet will have (p. 79)? What does this tell you about the state of government control in the book?
13. Jeannie tells Ash confidentially that the PM's considering 'martial law' (p. 80). What is this? And what is the significance of Jeannie telling Ash this fact?
14. Why is Mikey so 'freaked out' by police uniforms (p. 87)? What might this tell you about his past actions and treatment?
15. Why does Ash go 'off-script' at the press conference (p. 89)? What do you think his father would have thought of his actions?
16. Why does Ash refer to Mikey as a 'turncoat' (p. 91)?
17. Why does Ash 'hope to god' that the belief that taking a picture can capture a person's soul is true (p. 101)?
18. What is Ash's first impression of Lucinda (p. 102)? How does his impression of her change as the novel progresses?
19. List the main points of the Ash's dad's letter to him (pp 106–109).
20. What is the name of Mikey's frog (p. 114)? Why do you think the author chose this name? What links does this reference have to the themes of the book?
21. Why does Ash encourage Mikey to hit him again (p. 120)?
22. What motivates Ash, Jiao, Mikey and Travis to leave the train (p. 127)? Do you think they made the right decision? Why or why not?

23. How do Ash and Travis' family situations differ (p. 134)? How does Travis' family situation affect his behaviour?
24. Why does Cowboy Tossler give back one of the bottles of whisky (p. 144)?
25. Why can't Ash drive but Travis can (p. 146)? How does Ash feel about this?
26. Why does Jiao make Ash feel 'shallow and naive' (p. 164)? How do you think Jiao would react if she knew Ash felt this way?
27. What does Ash admit is his real incentive for wanting to find his mother (p. 168)?
28. Elrich says the concrete whale is 'very biblical' (p. 173). What is he alluding to?
29. Ash feels he is 'too boring. Ash by name, ash by nature' (p. 177). Do you agree with his sentiment? Why or why not?
30. Ash thinks Elrich is 'so skinny he looks like one of those poor bastards from Auschwitz' (p. 188)? What is this referring to? What links does this reference have to the themes of the book?
31. Why is Elrich happy to give Ash so much money (pp 191–192)? Do you agree with his motivation to do so?
32. The morning after their abduction Ash thinks 'it's strange that we're able to joke' (p. 208). Do you agree with this thought? Why or why not?
33. What is Ash's reaction when he first sees Grace (p. 209)? Do you think his behavior is justified?
34. Ash admits it never occurred to him that the members of Muru would 'all be white' (p. 221)? Why is this? What real-life groups does Muru's stance remind you of?
35. Do you agree with Jiao's theory of Ash being jealous of Travis (p. 223)? Do you think it is justified?
36. Why do you think Grace brings out the Frisbee (pp 236–237)? Do you think her tactic works?
37. Why does Ash think 'stage fright must be heaven' compared to the situation Travis is now in (p. 249)?
38. Why do Ash and Jiao give Travis a 'pineapple lump' to suck on after he has been shot (p. 254)?
39. How does hearing Ana's life story and talking further with her help explain Grace's behaviour (pp. 261–263)? Does it make you more sympathetic to them both as characters or not?
40. Ash refers to Grace and Ray as 'monsters' (p. 272). List their actions so far that have led him this conclusion.
41. As Erich dies, Ash thinks of a line from a poem (p. 287). Find the poem this line is taken from.
42. What is Ash's reaction when he gets his first glimpse of Wellington (p. 294)?
43. Why does Ash remain rigid when Jeannie hugs him (p. 302)? Do you think this reaction is justified?
44. How does Mikey behave when Ash is upset (pp 312–314)? Find another example when their roles are reversed later in the book.
45. What does Ash learn about Grace and her sister when he risks breaking curfew to visit his Grandmother (p. 318)? How does this information make him feel?
46. Why does Lucinda's compliment hurt Ash (p. 327)?
47. Jeannie offers to let Ash and Mikey live with her and Travis (p. 337). List her reasons behind the offer.
48. Ash thinks that the PM has 'sold us out' (p.346). Explain his reasoning behind this belief.

49. Jeannie suggests that Travis go with Ash and the others (pp 353–354). What is the motivation behind her request? How does Travis react to the request?

50. Where does Ash scatter his Dad's ashes and who is with him (p. 360)? Why does Ash choose this place? Do you think it is an effective ending?

Comprehension questions

1. Ash states that New Zealand is 'clean, green and peace-loving' (p. 9). Imagine you have to set up an information booth for New Zealand or your local area at an international immigration fair advertising what New Zealand or your local area has to offer. What would your booth look like and what information would it contain?

2. Ash is studying at university to be a speech and language specialist (p. 10). What does this job entail? What job do you want to do? Where would you like to work? What qualifications will you need? What would the work entail? See if you can arrange to be an intern or shadow a worker at the company of your choice. Write a report of your experience and present it to your class.

3. After the news of the explosion, Ash's 'world shrinks down to random snapshots' (p. 14) and again on the train everything 'replays in jerky flashes' (p. 123). Choose either of these series of images and present them in a storyboard for a movie format.

4. As Ash drives back into Wellington there is a description of the city (pp 18–19). Find other descriptions of places that are mentioned in the book. Locate these places on a map of the relevant city and/or New Zealand. Choose one of the places mentioned. Create and design an entry for a travel book for your chosen place as it is today. Include information such as population size, geography, history, things of interest and weather. Compare these details with how the place has been described in the book. For example, the

deserted town of Raetihi which Ash describes as being 'like the set of an old-time Western' (p. 178).

5. Jiao's 'la-di-da' books fall out of her bag (p. 20). Find and list all the books that Jiao reads throughout the novel. Choose one to do an author or book study on.

6. In the novel, citizens of New Zealand must conserve water and recycle (p. 26 and p. 60). Design a poster for a marketing campaign to inform the general public about these measures.

7. Ash finds only a few scrappy vegetables from the community garden in his dad's fridge (p. 25). In groups, design a community garden. Also research where the food you eat comes from. Is it local, imported, organic, ethical, etc?

8. The newsreader reads out about Ash's dad's 'life and times' (p. 50). Choose an important figure from your local area who has left a legacy and write an obituary.

9. Ash's dad launched a big campaign to reinstate the minimum wage (p. 70). Find out who protects the well-being of your community and write a formal letter to them about a community issue that concerns you. Research the procedures involved in lobbying against a decision that has been made for your community that you disagree with.

10. Mikey wants Ash to tell him the dragon story he made up when Mikey was small (p. 78). Write, illustrate, design and bind a children's book based on a story about a dragon.

11. The PM calls an emergency sitting of parliament and is considering martial law (pp 79–80). In groups, write a script for how this parliamentary sitting might have proceeded, then act it out.
12. The warship Ash and Jiao see in the harbour has the insignia of the Western Alliance on its stern (p. 83). Design this insignia as well as one for The United People's Republic.
13. Ash states that following another explosion 'It's like watching a movie that's thrown in every special effect it can afford' (p. 93). Find another war movie that is full of special effects, such as *Tomorrow When the War Began*. Write a comparative review.
14. The author writes a descriptive passage about the state the city is in (p. 94). Draw the scene. Then choose another one of the descriptive passages in the novel which you find particularly effective and use it to set the scene or the mood for your own piece of descriptive writing. Quote the passage as the epigraph for your work and clearly state the source (title, author, publisher, date, chapter and page number).
15. Ash reads some poetry to his grandmother and notes that its 'funny how words take on a different meaning, depending on the time and place they're used' (p. 100). Choose an important event in your life and find or write a poem that somehow reflects this event and your feelings about it.
16. Ash has a strong memory of when his grandmother was 'still full of life' (p. 100). Write a descriptive paragraph about one of your favourite memories of a member of your family.
17. Ash is given a letter from his dad (p. 105). Imagine you are Ash and write a reply.
18. Ash packs a bag to take to Inglewood (p. 113). In a group, decide what you would pack in an emergency situation if your group could only take five items and explain why you chose these items.
19. The author includes a description of the exterior and the interior of the chapel (pp 114–115). Find other examples of descriptions of exterior and interior spaces. Draw one of these based on the descriptions, then describe and draw an exterior and interior space of your choice.
20. Jiao wonders aloud after her treatment on the train 'where's our famous Kiwi charm?' (p. 136.) What other stereotypes are linked to different countries and cultures? Discuss as a class.
21. Simon Chan mentions 'Amnesty and the UN' (P. 151). What are these organisations? Where are they based? What do they do? What is their mission? Choose one to investigate then create a Power Point demonstration of your findings. Do the same with one of the fictitious organisations mentioned in the book, such as Muru.
22. Simon Chan gives Ash his business card (p. 152). Design this card.
23. Jiao tells Ash that the play *Romeo and Juliet* 'relates directly to what's happening now' (p. 163). Find examples of how it does and write a comparative text study.
24. Erich turns on the car radio so they can finally catch up on the news (pp 175–176). Choose one event mentioned to expand and write into either newspaper article or a news broadcast.
25. The book is full of dramatic, suspense-filled action sequences including the following:
 - the kidnapping (pp 196–201)
 - the bungled attack on the farm (pp 245–257)
 - the death of Grace (p. 341)
 Look at the language the author uses in these sequences. Write a dramatic action scene about something that has happened to you.

26. Ash wonders if Grace is under Ray's spell (p. 189). Research the psychology behind, and list the main components of, successful brainwashing. Give an example from history when this has been used to create prejudices against others, as in the novel.
27. Ash learns that his dad's office has been bugged and he and his family have been under police surveillance (p. 303). List and describe all the ways that Ash's freedom has been curtailed or restricted in the book. Think about how safe and private internet communication is. Some say it is as safe as sending a postcard. Do you agree or disagree?
28. Dad's study was his and Ash's 'sanctuary' and 'haven' (p. 312). Write an extended description of a place you consider a sanctuary or haven.
29. Ash describes swimming into the colony of rats as 'surreal' (p. 316). What is the literary definition of 'surrealism'? Choose a sequence from the novel and rewrite it as a surreal episode.
30. Ash compares his journey to playing games online (p. 320). Design a computer game based on the novel and include images. Create a pitch for your game and present it to your class.
31. Ash wonders if the kite was some 'weird metaphor' about his mother (p. 347). What object would you choose as a metaphor for another character from the novel, for yourself and for one of your own family members? List the reasons why you chose these objects.
32. Ash's dad always stood up for 'ordinary people's human rights' (p. 353). Find out about others who have suffered as victims of human rights abuse. How are they being helped? What agencies have been set up? How can you help? Set up and design a charity campaign to help. Think, for example, about marketing techniques.
33. Ash feels like he's 'living out something that's been pre-ordained' (p. 354). How much control do you think people have or should have over their own destinies? How much control should the government have? How much should schools, society, family and social groups have? Discuss as a class.
34. Lucinda and Ash agree on the specific wording of his declaration (p. 356). Write out this declaration. Then divide into pairs. In character, one person writes questions as a journalist and the other person then answers them as Ash or Lucinda might.
35. The names below are mentioned in the book. Write a paragraph for each to explain to someone from the future who or what they are.
- Elvis Presley (p. 40)
 - Superman (p. 49)
 - Thomas and Percy (p. 91)
 - Scoo-bee-doo (p. 128)
 - Rudolf the red-nosed reindeer (p. 157)
 - Pollyanna (p. 222)
 - Little Red Riding Hood (p. 224)
 - Mata Hari (p. 229)
 - James Bond (p. 229)
36. Jiao quotes from Victor Hugo (pp 64–65) and Henry James (p. 281). Choose one to write an author study on.
37. Walter de la Mare poems are read out at Ash's dad's funeral (p. 117) and to Ash's grandmother (pp 319–320). Choose a poem by de la Mare and recite for your class.
38. Use the following quotes from the book as either a topic for a class debate or as an essay starter.
- New Zealand: 'clean, green and peace-loving' (p. 9)
 - 'That's Downs for you. Both gift and curse.' (p. 18)

- 'Money should never be the referee of what is wrong or right.' (p. 68)
 - 'Education is the key to everything.' (p. 107)
 - 'Free speech is only tolerated when it suits those in charge.' (p. 109)
 - 'If you've got a gun, one day you're going to use it.' (p. 257)
 - 'History's just one bloody war after another.' (p. 281)
 - 'Freedom has a very thin veneer if you look too close.' (p. 334)
39. Design your own cover for the novel, including the blurb.
40. Do you think the novel would make a good dramatic film? Write a letter in support of the film for possible investors. Look at some movie posters. Notice the pictures and the words. Design a movie poster to advertise the film.
41. Write a dramatic monologue from Ash's point of view, retelling the experiences he's had in the novel including his discovery that Grace is alive. Perform it for the class.
42. Do you think there could possibly be a sequel to this book? What do you think could or should happen in it? Write a one-page outline of the plot for the sequel you would write. Choose a title.
43. Find other books which have young adult characters dealing with war. Write a comparative review where you compare and contrast *The Nature of Ash* with at least one other novel dealing with this theme.
44. In groups, create a timeline that shows the main events of the novel.
45. In groups, discuss one of the following questions.
- When was a positive or negative view of humanity and/or society successfully portrayed in the book?
 - When did the settings help develop the themes of the book?
 - When was an internal and/or external conflict of a character reflected in the book?
46. Write a diary entry from the point of view of Ash, Jiao, Ana or Jeannie about one of the main events in the book.
47. Rewrite one of the climactic scenes as a video script. If your school has filming equipment, produce your scene.
48. Write a review of the book, aiming it at the readership of your favourite magazine, newspaper or website. Consider the following questions.
- What situations had a ring of truth for you?
 - Which characters appealed to you the most? The least?
 - How did the story make you feel as it unfolded?
 - What ideas in the book awakened your interest?
 - What did you dislike, or find boring?
 - Did the ending surprise you?