

IF NOT US

MARK SMITH

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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 14+

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CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.

SYNOPSIS

Hesse lives in a small coastal town, where a coalmine and power station are a part of the scenery, and a part of the ever-growing problem of climate change. His mum is a member of a local environmental group campaigning to close the mine and shut down the power station. It's a no-brainer, of course, but Hesse is more interested in surfing—and in Fenna, the new exchange student from the Netherlands.

But when someone seems to be trying to derail the campaign, and his friends' families face losing their jobs, Hesse begins to realise that things are complex.

Even though he's reluctant to step into the spotlight, with Fenna's encouragement he decides it's time to make a stand. Because some things are too important to leave to everyone else. And even one small, nervous voice can make a difference.

When Hesse agrees to speak at a protest meeting he has no idea of the storm he is about to unleash.

If Not Us is Mark Smith's first standalone YA novel following his hugely successful Winter trilogy. It's another great story with an engaging and relatable protagonist, as well as an impassioned plea for climate-change action that will inspire and empower readers of all ages.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Smith is an award-winning author. He lives, works and surfs on Victoria's Surf Coast. His acclaimed Winter trilogy is widely taught in secondary schools and loved by readers of all ages.

PRAISE FOR *IF NOT US*

'Moving and powerful...The right book for right now.'
Kate O'Donnell

'*If Not Us* has it all: gutsy characters, a good fight, bone-shaking loss, love and hope.'
Scot Gardner

BEFORE READING

- Two quotes are provided in the epigraph of *If Not Us*. One is from John F. Kennedy and the other from Greta Thunberg. Who are these speakers? What issues are they speaking about? What tone do these quotes set from the rest of the novel?
- Watch the video of Greta Thunberg speaking at the United Nations Climate Summit in 2019. What persuasive techniques does Thunberg use? How effective is her speech?
- The issue of climate change is recognised by a number of young people as the most pressing issue in the modern world. What are some of the different views that currently exist on climate change? What is your view on climate change? What do you think needs to be done?

WHILE READING

- 'He was writing an essay on climate change for English. The more research he'd done the angrier he had become.' (p. 15) Do your own research into climate change by utilising trustworthy, credible and up-to-date sources. Do you feel similarly to Hesse or differently about climate change after having researched the issue?



2. 'He'd heard of the Franklin dam protests.' (p.17) What were the Franklin dam protests? What were people protesting for? What did they achieve? Why do you think Smith includes this historical reference?
3. Early in the book, Oliver mentions that social media plays an important role in activism. How could social media be used to shine light on important issues? Have you seen social media being used to showcase important issues in your own community?
4. 'Easter used to mark the turning of the season, but now it was more like June. With the research he'd done for his essay Hesse wondered whether climate change was already having an effect.' (p. 23) How has climate change impacted your world? How is climate change becoming more visible in our world?
5. Fenna is surprised that more girls aren't out surfing in Shelbourne. Why do you think there are so few girls surfing in Shelbourne? Do you think some girls still feel reluctant to partake in sports that historically were male dominated?
6. Fenna finds it unusual when she sees a wood fire burning in Hesse's house, remarking: 'They're so bad for the environment.' (p. 45) Conduct your own research into wood fires. Why are they 'so bad' for the environment?
7. Hesse remarks that Felicity's dad is 'biased'. What does biased mean? Why might Felicity's dad be 'biased' when it comes to the issue of climate change?
8. 'Climate change is everywhere in the media at the moment.' (p. 99) Where have you seen climate change in the media? Who is talking about this issue? What is being campaigned for?
9. On page 142, Hesse is given an envelope containing air monitor figures. What do the figures reveal?
2. 'This was David versus Goliath times a hundred.' (p. 19) What is this metaphor suggesting? Do you think a lot of young activists feel this way when embarking on a journey to encourage change?
3. Surfing is an important motif throughout the novel. What does surfing symbolise in the novel, and to Hesse and the community of Shelbourne?
4. Hesse provides the following analogy on page 55: 'If you had a toothache and nine dentists all said you needed a filling, but a plumber told you it looked okay, would you believe the plumber?' What is he implying about certain responses to climate change? Can you think of another analogy that illustrates this point?

THEMES

Environmentalism

1. 'Greenies?' he said. 'What is this, 1980?' (p. 109) How have perceptions of environmental activism shifted?
2. Rachel remarks at the school assembly: 'There never seems to be a right time to talk about climate change. And if the government was doing its job, we wouldn't have to go out on strike. But they're doing nothing, so it's up to us to force them to act. It's a climate emergency!' Do you agree with Rachel? Do you think the government needs to do more to target climate change?
3. 'Sorry to break it to you, but a couple of hundred school kids in Castlereagh aren't going to change the world.' (p. 125) How does Fenna refute Felicity's claim here? How can even just one person make a difference?
4. What impact do mine/power station closures have on a small community? Use the Hazelwood mine in the LaTrobe Valley as a case study.

Finding your voice

1. 'He was a good bloke your dad.' (p. 119) What makes someone a 'good bloke'? Do you think that Hesse is a 'good bloke'?
2. 'To Hesse's eyes everything Steve did seemed to be in slow motion, at odds with the power and fury of what was happening around him.' (p. 255) What prevents people from standing up for what they believe in?
3. 'You're going to make enemies you don't even know exist.' (p. 126) Hesse finds it difficult to find his voice and to stand up for what he believes in. What gives Hesse the strength to find his voice?

Mental health

1. What happens to Fenna when she is anxious? How does Fenna describe it on page 61? How does Fenna cope with her anxiety? How can we best support someone who experiences anxiety?
2. 'Being out on the water gave him the chance to see his problems in a new light, like they were anchored to the land and he could view them from a distance.'

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

1. Hesse and Jago are two very different characters. In what ways are they different? What is Smith implying through the juxtaposition of the characterisation of Jago and Hesse?
2. Despite the language barrier, Hesse and Fenna connect immediately. How does Smith show us this?
3. 'He had always wondered if he might feel something out here, like some element of his dad could still exist in the water, in the kelp beds, the rocks and the barnacles that clung to the reef.' (p. 117) How has the death of Hesse's affected him? Which characters does Hesse look to for guidance and support?

STYLE & STRUCTURE

1. A number of Australian colloquialisms are utilised by Smith throughout the book. For example; arvo, bloke and mate. What other colloquialisms are used? What is the effect of these colloquialisms?



RESPONDING

1. On page 54, Mr Dalgety facilitates a discussion on climate change in his English classroom. In small groups, discuss the severity of climate change, making sure to provide evidence to support your ideas.
 2. Conduct a close analysis of the debate between Hesse and Felicity on page 54. What are the two viewpoints shown here towards climate change? How do they each support their views? Which view do you agree with and why?
 3. If you had to give a speech on an issue of your choice, what would it be? Like Hesse, write your own persuasive speech on a contemporary issue.
 4. 'It's all in the way they frame the story. They're not interested in being objective. They'll find the human-interest angle and workers losing their jobs in a small town always plays well.' (p. 199) Is it important to recognise how a news story is framed? What critical thinking skills do we need to apply when watching and reading the news? Find a news story online and present the story from a different angle. How easy is it to manipulate how an audience understands a story?
 5. Why do you think Felicity made the decision to leak the Hadron documents? What would you have done in Felicity's position? Write a reflective piece explaining how and why you would have acted in her position.
- (p. 116) How does surfing support Hesse with maintaining strong mental health?
3. 'What I'm saying is, you can paddle back in. No judgment.' (p. 254) How do characters in the novel support each other with their mental health?

GETTING INVOLVED: ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

1. 'Some of you may not want to hear it, but everybody in town has a right to decide its future.' (p. 148) What are the issues facing your local community? What volunteer opportunities exist through your local council?
2. Visit [Environment Victoria's website](#) to find out more about the various environmental groups currently operating.
3. Brainstorm direct and indirect ways to make environmental change with your friends and peers. Direct ways to get involved could be through litter pick up or tree planting days. Indirect ways could be to protest or spread awareness about climate change.
4. 'Hesse had heard about the Strike for Climate rallies.' (p. 79) What are the strikes for climate rallies? Have you ever attended one? Have you ever attended a rally or protest? What rallies or protests could you be involved with in future?
5. In what ways can you promote discussion of important issues at school?