

## Literature Unit 1: *Touching The Void* by Joe Simpson

### Skills targeted:

**AO1** Respond to texts critically and imaginatively; select and evaluate relevant textual detail to illustrate and support interpretations.

**AO2** Explain how language, structure and form contribute to writers' presentation of ideas, themes and settings.

### Why study this text?

This is a vivid, intense and powerful story of a horrifying adventure in the Peruvian Andes. Two experienced climbers, Joe Simpson and Simon Yates, set out to conquer the mountain Siula Grande. They do indeed achieve their aim, but disaster strikes on the way down and Simon has to make an impossible decision – should he cut the rope holding Joe, thereby saving his own life, or should he stay attached, leading to certain death for both of them? The subsequent chapters relate how Joe managed to return to camp, in agony and often literally 'out of his mind'.

This true story will appeal to all those who like to experience tales of adventure, adversity and endurance. It shows the triumph of the human spirit, the immense will to survive and the innate strength we have within us to succeed. It is partly factual travel writing and partly autobiographical, but also falls into the genre of literary non-fiction. The variety of themes it encompasses ensures its appeal to all kinds of reader, and there is also much to comment on in the use of language and literary techniques. There is no requirement for specialist knowledge of mountaineering to understand the many inspirational messages in this book.

### Background and context

In 1985 climbers Joe Simpson and Simon Yates went to the Cordillera Huayhuash in Peru to climb Siula Grande. At 6344 metres it is the second highest mountain in the range and previously unconquered. They succeeded in their attempt to be the first to reach the summit, but disaster struck on the way down when Joe broke his leg.

Joe's survival and his account of it have earned its place as one of the most remarkable pieces of mountaineering lore in history. It is not without controversy. Was Simon right to cut the rope? Shouldn't he have held on as long as he could to give Joe more of a chance to work out a solution? Joe, on the other hand, has always offered complete support for Simon's actions. He is vindicated by the probability that both would have died if he had held on. Cutting the rope freed Simon to seek shelter from the storm, and allowed for the possibility that Joe would be dropped to a spot where he could shelter from the weather. Simon was able to climb down to base camp and spent time regaining his strength. When Joe finally arrived, Simon and Richard (who had been waiting at base camp) were intending to leave in the morning. If Simon had not returned to the camp ahead of Joe, Richard would probably have left well before Joe had managed to get to camp. Without anyone to help him out of the mountains, Joe would have died there. So, by cutting the rope Simon actually saved both their lives. This is not to say that he didn't suffer extreme feelings of guilt and thought that he had in fact killed Joe.

The story can be placed in the context of other heroic feats of survival and endurance. For example, Scott's expedition to the South Pole, the conquest of Everest by Hilary and Tensing, and more recently, the successful third attempt to reach the summit by Ranulph Fiennes at the age of 65 (May 2009).

## Discussion points

### Themes

Fear; ambition; survival; anxiety; friendship; guilt; decision-making; pain.

### Ways in

1. Ask students the following: Have you had an experience which really frightened you? Can you remember an occasion when you had to make a really difficult decision? What was the last time you felt really guilty about something?
2. Research the Peruvian Andes, with the help of a map.
3. Look at the photographs in the book (Vintage edition). Ask students to choose one and describe it. Give reasons for their choice of photograph.
4. Read the opening chapter and look for the following features: vivid description, use of direct speech, creation of atmosphere, creation of tension.
5. Explore specific mountaineering terminology used in the book, including vocabulary such as crevasses, moraines and all the specialist equipment.
6. The film of the book can be used to accompany reading or for discussion later, e.g. freeze frame a scene: students discuss what has just happened and what is about to happen.

### Key questions to consider

- Why is the book called *Touching the Void*?
- Why did Joe decide to write the book?
- Choose an extract (e.g. pages 64–5/145–6). What techniques does Joe use to make his writing more interesting and effective?

### Example tasks

- The other point of view: There are three main people in the story, Simon, Joe and Richard. We hear directly from Simon and Joe, but not from Richard. Ask the class to tell the story from Richard's point of view. This would involve not only the beginning and the end of the story, but also an exploration of his feelings whilst he is waiting for the climbers to come down and his emotions at seeing Simon return alone.
- Create a mock interview with one of the characters or a newspaper article reporting the main events.
- Possible outcomes: Group presentation to the rest of the class, display of students' newspaper headlines and articles.

### Analytical approaches

- Timeline: after reading Chapters 5–7 make a timeline of the events as they happened.
- Characters: analyse any differences in character between Joe and Simon, e.g. think in terms of ambition, optimism v. pessimism.
- Structure: for example, the change of narrator – what effects do these techniques have?
- Use of language: how is language used for example to describe fear? To influence tone, to describe setting?

### Creative approaches

- Write about an adventure in your life that went wrong. If something went wrong again, would you respond differently?

- Have you ever climbed a mountain? Describe your feelings when you reached the top.
- Or: have you ever been in a storm? How would you describe it? What were your feelings about it?
- Have you ever achieved something that you had thought was impossible? What challenges did you face?

## Key issues for improving grades

The specification states that answers should:

- be relevant – you don't need to write everything you know about the text, only the things that relate to the question
- be sufficiently detailed – it is better to give a lot of detail about a small part of the text than trying to cover lots of different points
- be well structured – with a clear introduction which addresses the question and a clear conclusion that returns to the question
- use effective vocabulary – including literary terms where relevant
- use well-chosen evidence/quotations to support points.

To gain a top grade, candidates should show an enthusiastic and critical personal response. The best candidates write about the author's methods and achievements, and will concentrate on comment, not content.

## Nelson Thornes resources to support this unit

Interactive resources to support a selection of the set texts will be available via Nelson Thornes' online learning space, *kerboodle!*. The resources will support text comprehension, exam practice and revision. The texts covered are:

*Mister Pip*

*Romeo and Juliet*

*Martyn Pig*

*Of Mice and Men*

*An Inspector Calls*

*Lord of the Flies*

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