



A Flame in the Dark

by Maria Gill

About the author

Maria Gill is a New Zealand author and former journalist known for bringing history to life for young readers. Based in Auckland, she has written numerous award-winning non-fiction books that explore New Zealand's people, places, and past, often focusing on untold or lesser-known stories. Gill's work is widely used in schools and praised for its engaging, accessible style. With a background in feature writing, she combines strong research with compelling storytelling. *A Flame in the Dark* is her first YA work and continues her commitment to inspiring readers to connect with history and the human experiences behind it.

Synopsis of novel

Based on the true story of Nancy Wake, a NZ born Australian who married a Frenchman and became involved in the French Resistance during WWII. Originally trained and working in France as a journalist, Nancy became a courier for the resistance whilst living with her husband in Marseilles. Forced to flee to England, she then trained as a spy and returned to France to continue her work undermining the Nazi influence in France. This novel communicates the history of Nancy's life and the times she lived appropriately and engagingly for young adults. It does this by bringing Nancy to life and making us care deeply about her experiences.

Themes / issues

The novel is a springboard to explore themes of self-belief and doing what you can in the face of apparently insurmountable odds. At the same time, it draws a clear picture of the obstacles faced by women in the 1930s and 1940s, which could lead into reflection on the origins of second-wave feminism.

Writing style

Gill is known primarily as a historian and non-fiction writer. This background is visible in the text through the detail of both place and time, without becoming inaccessibly academic or dry. The writing is easily accessible to young readers, introducing complex ideas and history through straightforward description and dialogue.

Year level suitability and application

This is a novel that could be studied at a range of levels. The accessible writing and adventure story format would engage younger readers in Years 8 or 9. Nonetheless, there is sufficient thematic and historical depth to provide sufficient material for a more sophisticated study in Years 10 or 11. The activities below are more suited for the older age groups, but can be adapted and simplified for younger students. Learning opportunities



Learning opportunities

Before reading:

Prior knowledge discussion / activities:

- History of WWII
- French resistance and British spies
- Expectations of women in 1930s Australia and Britain
- Spain's role in the conflict

During reading: Understanding the content

These tasks and questions are intended to be prompts for classroom discussion during reading. They could also be used as individual written reflections. They are a mixture of comprehension questions (finding information and drawing inferences) and prompts for deeper reflection. The latter are repeated in the final section on themes.

Chapter 1

- What do we learn about Nancy's family circumstances in this chapter?
- List three quotes that demonstrate Nancy's personality.
- Write an extra chapter, describing what happens to Nancy between the end of Chapter 1 and the start of Chapter 2.

Chapter 2

- Describe Aunt Hinemoa (you will need to use your imagination, taking the little information we are given and expanding on it.)
- What do we learn about societal norms for young women in 1932? How does Nancy challenge those expectations?
- What is the significance of being gifted pounamu (greenstone)?

Chapter 3

- How does Nancy deceive the recruitment officer?
- How does Nancy begin to uncover what is really happening in Germany?
- Analyse the way that Gill develops a sense of tension before the assassination of King Alexander.

Chapter 4

- What is Nancy's reaction to the possibility of war?
- How are her conflicting responses communicated?
- What are the reasons presented for and against Nancy travelling to Berlin with her colleagues?
 - What does this tell us about the ways in which women's lives were restricted by social convention?
- How does Nancy's reaction to the looting and burning of Jewish shops tell us more about her personality?
 - How does the fact that nobody intervenes teach us about the way German society was responding to the rise of the Nazis?

Chapter 5

- The journalists give the Austrian Jew a range of suggestions for how to emigrate. What do we learn about the way the world was responding to the growing crisis in Europe from these suggestions?
- "... the invasion had already begun. Not with tanks, but with words." Explain what is meant by this. Can you find parallels with conflicts happening in the world today?
- Why is Nancy reluctant to get involved with Henri?

Chapter 6

- Why does Nancy agree to give up her job when she marries Henri?

Chapter 7

- Do you think Henri really believes that Nancy will follow through on her determination to get involved in the war effort, when he chooses to go ahead with the wedding?
- Why does Nancy see being an ambulance driver as more rewarding than being a nurse?
- Describe Nancy's first driving lesson from Henri's perspective.

Chapter 8

- How does Gill bring the horror of the war to life for us in this chapter?

Chapter 9

- On pages 110 – 111, the political situation in France is communicated through a dialogue between Nancy and Henri. Summarise the situation.
- Why does Nancy start running messages for the resistance?

Chapter 10

- How reliable do you think Nancy's test for trustworthiness is?
 - * Why might someone who had fought the Germans in WW1 now collaborate with them?
- List the evidence provided for the increasing impact of the war on life in Marseilles.
- Nancy concludes that Henri is not the man his father wants him to be. What sort of man is he? Use evidence from this and preceding chapters.

Chapter 11

- How is Nancy using the attitude to women as protection? Find a quote that sums up her perspective.
- Why does Nancy use a different disguise for each trip?

Chapter 12

- Why did Paul Cole not betray Nancy?
 - * How does this tell us more about the way women were viewed at the time?
- How is the relationship between Henri and Nancy changing?
- What does Nancy's determination to rescue Ian tell us about her character?

Chapter 13

- How does Nancy use Henri's wealth to protect them?
- What choice would you have made in Nancy's position? Why?

Chapter 14

- In what ways is Nancy's pride and determination as much a hindrance as a help to the cause?

Chapter 15

- What was the catalyst for Nancy deciding to leave France?

Chapters 16 and 17

- How does Nancy keep herself from despair during the interrogation?
- What does the interrogation and rescue tell us about the priorities of the French police?
- Why is Nancy so upset about losing her bag?

Chapter 18

- How does Gill help us to experience the discomfort of the journey?
- Why does she make a connection to Nancy's childhood visit to her family in New Zealand?
- What sign are we given that the meeting with the new agent might be a trap?

Chapter 19

- How are the different characters of the two Americans established?
- How does the guide work out who Nancy is?
- What indication are we given that Miles doesn't really understand the danger they are in?

Chapter 20

- Why are soft shoes better than sturdy boots?
- Why will Nancy not simply abandon Miles?
- What do we learn about how people are motivated to survive and what makes them give up?

Chapter 21

- Why is arriving in Spain not the end of their problems?
- Why does Nancy claim to be American?
- Why does Jean escape from the bus?

Chapter 22

- If this were not based on a true story, would you believe that Nancy and Micheline ended up on the same transport back to England?
 - * Why do we struggle to believe in coincidence?
- How does having Micheline to look after help Nancy endure the dangers of the voyage?
- Why did the British Consulate not check that she had the paperwork needed to get back into England?

Chapter 23

- Why does Nancy not want to work at the War Office?
- “she no longer knew how to live in safety”
 - * How does this statement communicate the depth of trauma that Nancy has endured?
- What was it that motivated Nancy to put her grief behind her and move on with life?
 - * What does this tell us about her character?
 - * How does this experience change the way she feels about her mother?

Chapter 24

- Why does Nancy take her greenstone back to France with her, against the rules?
- What does the inclusion of a pink nightie and red lipstick tell us about Nancy?
- Why does Nancy have to carry a cyanide pill?
- How does Denis challenge our concept of bravery?
- “her shortcomings were now her assets”
 - * What does this comment tell us about what characteristics will be needed as a spy?

Chapter 25

- Why is it a problem that people know about Nancy?
- Why did Nancy drinking the whisky make an impression on the men?
- Why do they not trust Nancy and Hubert?

Chapter 26

- Explain Gaspard’s attitude to Nancy.
- Why is it important that the bridge can’t be seen from above?
- What assumptions is Nancy deliberately challenging?

Chapter 27

- The Maquis are people who are voluntarily resisting the Germans. Why does that make it more difficult to impose discipline?
- Why does Nancy fear that something terrible will happen?
- Why does Nancy tell them to kill Roger?

Chapter 28

- How do we learn that Gaspar has changed his attitude after the attack?

- Why is Nancy worried about having everyone in one place?
- Why is Nancy surprised that nobody argues with her?
- How did Nancy convince Madame Renard to trust her?
- “Ten thousand Germans or not, she still had a job. ‘I’m off to fetch last night’s spoils.’”
 - * How does this quote sum up Nancy’s character?

Chapter 29

- Did the orders for Gaspard to retreat come from General Koenig?
 - * Why does Nancy say they did?
- Why are the items in the car important to Nancy?
- Why do you think the poor are more willing to help than the rich?
- How does the attitude communicated in the last couple of lines show us how Nancy achieves as much as she does?

Chapter 30

- What was the rationale for Nancy being the one to travel to Chateauroux?
- What assumptions allow Nancy to pass through checkpoints unchallenged?

Chapter 31

- Why does silence “scream danger”?
- What do you think the other person said that led to the refusal of the radio operator to help?
- How does her Granny help Nancy to keep going?

Chapter 32

- Why did Denis assume Nancy hadn’t been successful?
- Why did the Germans massacre an entire village?
- Why does Tardi think a desire for a comfortable bed contradicts Nancy’s courage and fortitude?
- What does the humour in the exchange with the Americans tell us about the way Hubert, Denis and Nancy are coping with the situation?
- While other people are panicking, Nancy takes charge. How does this reflect her personality?

Chapter 33

- Why do you think Denis volunteered to fight in France?

- Why have the French resistance begun to think of Nancy as one of their own?
- How does the way Nancy sees symbolise their position?
- How does washing and putting on clean clothes help Nancy to prepare for the next fight?
- Is Tardivat correct in comparing Nancy to Gaspard?
 - * How are they similar?
 - * How are they different?
- Was the attack on the German headquarters worth the likely reprisals?
 - * What did such an attack achieve?

Chapter 34

- Why do the men follow Nancy's suggestion, even though they think it amusing?
- What is the danger in feeling like the war is almost won?

Chapter 35

- What is the logic Nancy uses to persuade them to retreat?
- Why does killing someone with her bare hands seem harder than shooting them?

Chapter 36

- Why was Nancy feeling anxious after the German army had marched past?
- How did the men honour Nancy?
- Why is Nancy not happy that the collaborators have been killed?
- What is Nancy told at the end of the chapter?

Chapter 37

- Was Henri's death Nancy's fault?

Post reading: Taking it further

Activities and discussion points

- Create a map of Nancy's travels.
 - Make up a code and transmit messages to your friends.
 - Nancy's grandmother never gave her a pounamu, yet this becomes a central symbol in the novel. Create a visual representation of the significance of this item to Nancy.
 - Describe a battle scene from Denis' perspective.
 - Describe Nancy from Gaspard's perspective.
 - Stage a debate about the purpose and impact of attacking the German headquarters in Mountlucon.
 - Write the conversation Nancy has with her mother when she returns to Australia.
 - Create character cards for Hubert, Denis, Tardivat, Henri and Gaspard. Include the relationship each had with Nancy and role she played in changing them somehow.
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- In what way was Nancy Wake "a flame in darkness"?
 - What does this story teach us about the nature of courage?
 - Would Nancy's story have been different if she had lived in the 21st century?
 - * What differences would there be?
 - How did the fact that Nancy was female help her as well as hinder her?
 - Was Nancy totally self-centred?