



When Empire Calls - Ken Catran

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James, a young Kiwi teenager, is envious and proud of his older siblings as first his brothers then his sisters take up the challenge of helping defend the British Empire by becoming involved in the Second Boer War.

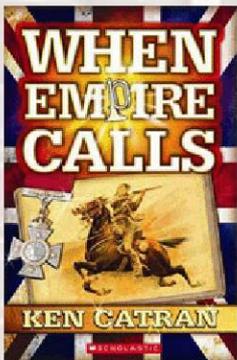
Told in the first person and through letters one brother sends James, the reader is soon aware of the many attitudes towards war. Set in rural and small town New Zealand in the last years of the nineteenth century, racial attitudes, both here and in South Africa, and a teenager's growing up pains are all included.

James can not understand why Croaky Fred is against war. News from South Africa is bad. James has to face the varying reactions to men returning from war injured. He has to come to terms with death and loss and the many changes that affect his family and his community. He comes to despise Croaky Fred and takes out his anger and frustrations on this owner of the town's general store. But from this climax and the reparation required comes a new understanding.

James learns from his mistakes and knows that he is a better person for them. Pride and envy of his brothers are replaced by a growing understanding about life in general and war in particular. The author has added a brief introduction to help the young reader understand a little of the origins of this conflict. He finishes the book with his personal perspective on the various wars New Zealand has become involved in since this Second Boer War.

As a teacher of both English and History in a past life, I see this book by Ken Catran as an excellent read for students of Years 8 – 10 studying war and conflict. It covers the 'rites of passage', as mentioned in the introduction, and is relevant to girls as well as boys. The historical setting is reinforced with the use of expressions that were more common in earlier times which help set the scene. The hierarchy within the community also reflects an earlier time.

Reviewed by Bookrapt member Chris Wright.



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