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Cyclone Bola Gisborne 1988 – Kath Beattie

Publisher: Scholastic New Zealand

RRP \$18.50

This is another in the My New Zealand Story series of 'vividly imagined accounts of life in the past ... making history come alive'.

Author Kath Beattie has set her story on an actual farm, using the memories and photos of June Dyer and friends from her area who lived through this devastating event. As well she has used archival material carefully sourced for her from the H.B. Williams Memorial Library in Gisborne.

To this the author has added the fictional central character of Amy, in her second year at Northcote Intermediate, and her parents, plus Amy's best friends. As well there are her Auckland teacher who sets some work for Amy for the six weeks she will be away, and Amy's Gisborne teacher and classmates.

From her initial horror and anger at being left behind while her parents join friends sailing their yacht across the Pacific Ocean, Amy learns to adjust to life with her Aunt June and Uncle Jim on their vineyard. She learns firsthand the work involved in caring for pets and farm animals as she adjusts to the daily routines of this life, so very different from Auckland. Amy's diary records these adjustments. The help and wisdom of her Aunt and Uncle help Amy a lot. Her assignments for Mrs Henderson show the reader what Amy is learning about Gisborne. Her new teacher Mr Heperi recognizes Amy's inquiring mind and sends her off to the local library to do additional research. But it is not only Amy who is learning and adjusting - the reader cannot help but learn about things as varied as hermaphroditic grapes and the sex life of avocados, the Beehive and the government's plans to sell off government-owned properties, the brix test, weather gauges and so on.

The news of a tropical cyclone in the Pacific and the lack of news from her parents make Amy very anxious. Aunt June and Uncle Jim do what they can to help and to reassure Amy, keeping her busy too. Meanwhile the reader learns about tropical cyclones and some of the major ones to have affected New Zealand, about the role of Civil Defence in New Zealand and emergency precautions to be taken, surviving without electricity or phone, the smell and damage silt can cause, the helpfulness of friends and strangers alike, the role of stock and station agents, of helicopters and life boats, the devastation of an event like this cyclone on the lives and farms and businesses of a community.

Amy's diary is a useful device for showing the reader the fluctuating moods of Amy, her fears, her strengths of character. The author also makes good use of newspaper and radio headlines as they update details of the movement of the cyclone and its devastation. Photos add to the realism of the situation, with not only farms and farmers cut off from their neighbours for days, but the towns of Wairoa and Gisborne were cut off from the outside world.

This book and this series are aimed at the Intermediate level study of NZ Disasters. Each student could make their own choice from a mixed book box on New Zealand disasters. Assignment sheets could be completed. Wall charts could display the pertinent details of each disaster (the 5 Ws and an H). While there might be some readers of this age group who might find this story too dense with information, there are others who, like Amy, would soak it up and look for more.

Reviewed for Bookrapt by Chris Wright.

