

## The Bridge

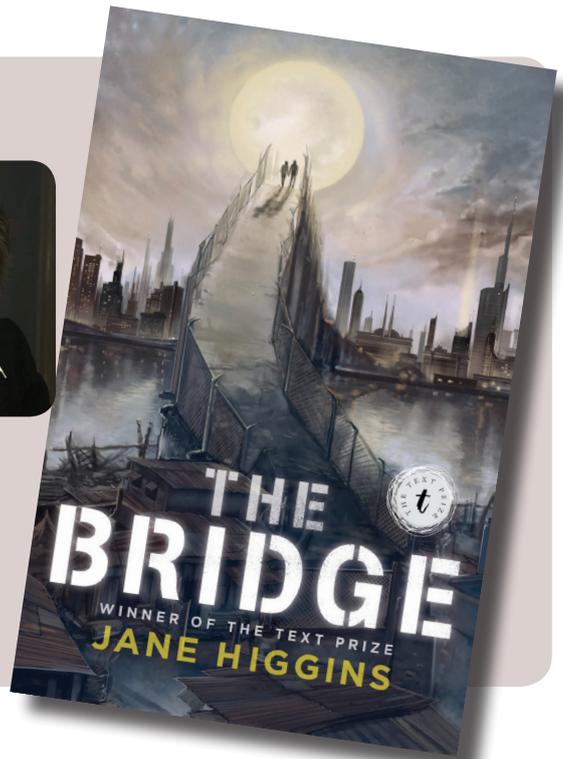
Jane Higgins

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Recommended for Secondary School



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### Praise

'*The Bridge* is brilliant. Every sentence is skillfully crafted, with just enough left unsaid that the reader is always hungry for more...This is a breathtaking first novel.' *Junior Bookseller and Publisher*

### Synopsis

Set in the not-too-distant future, this is more than an action story. It portrays a world crippled by war in which hatreds and suspicions run deep. Set in the heart of the battle zone, the story explores the tragedies of conflict but also the possibility of moving beyond this conflict towards peace.

The City is divided. The bridges are gated. Southside, the hostiles live in squalor and desperation, waiting for a chance to overrun Cityside.

Nik is destined for a great career with the Internal Security and Intelligence Services, the brains behind the war. But when ISIS comes recruiting, he's not chosen. There must be an explanation, but no one will talk about it.

Then the school is bombed and the hostiles take the bridges. Buildings are burning, kids are dead, and the hostiles have kidnapped Sol. Now ISIS is hunting for Nik.

But Nik is on the run, with Sol's sister Fyffe. Across the bridge. Looking for Sol.

And finding answers to questions he'd never even thought to ask.

*The Bridge* is a gritty adventure set in a future world where fear of outsiders pervades everything. It's a compelling novel about friendship, identity and courage from an exciting new voice in young-adult fiction.

### About the Author

Jane Higgins was born in New Zealand. She has degrees in mathematics and anthropology and has worked on many human rights campaigns. She is a senior research fellow at Lincoln University specialising in youth studies. Jane lives in Christchurch with her husband. *The Bridge* is her first novel.

### Read the Prologue and consider the following:

Higgins opens her tale with, 'We rode to war in a taxi-cab'. Share your response to this opening line with a classmate and talk about your expectations for the story that is to follow. With your partner, go to the library and read the opening lines of a selection of novels. Discuss their dramatic power. Try to decide what makes a gripping opening line.

### Extension Activities

- Write a few story starters of your own. List the most powerful ones on the board and choose one as a basis for a creative story. Share these stories with the class.
- Using only the prologue, find references in the text that might hint at the era in which this story is set.
- Consider the way in which Higgins ends the prologue. What devices does she use to ensure that the reader will indeed turn the page?

### Read chapters 1–10 and consider the following:

1. Within the opening paragraphs of chapter one, we accept that the narrator is young. Find examples of language choice that clearly indicate this.

2. ISIS is introduced to us as producing soldier/agents who are 'As alike as peas in a pod, as bullets in a belt.' (p.3) In what way might this be a warning rather than a description?
3. Examine the vocabulary used to describe the enemy: 'hostiles', 'heathens', 'an enemy with no soul', etc. Consider your immediate response to this un-named enemy. How is Scripture used to cement this dislike and how does the Victory Day message serve to intensify it? In addition, what is at stake, according to Dr Stapelton, if the enemy is victorious?
4. Look carefully at the description of Dr Stapelton and demonstrate that Higgins is alerting us to his untrustworthy nature.
5. What are the phrases used to ensure that readers are well aware of Lou's privileged status?
6. We learn that the school has to use 'generator power', (p.9) that roast potatoes and bread and butter are but a memory (p.10) and that dessert was 'pseudo fruit' (p.10). What do we understand so far about living conditions in this world? What do we understand about change?
7. Examine the way in which Higgins ends her chapters by deepening the mystery.
8. What is a talisman? Research organisations that use a talisman to identify members.
9. Examine the way in which Macey speaks to Nik. Look at their history and the lessons that Macey has offered. Why do you think Higgins needs readers to understand that a special relationship exists?
10. Higgins describes the pain of seeing others with their family as 'like picking a scab. You know it will bleed and take longer to heal but you can't resist.' (p.17) What do we learn about Nik's personal life from this description?
11. Examine the way in which information is transmitted to the children in Tornmoor Academy. 'We were told, all this time, that the fighting was going well, but we heard rumours too...' (p.18) Also, '...we had no real news to chew on...City News drip-fed us details now and then, but it was news-lite about the fighting'. Even the images in the newspaper are described as, 'grainy pictures'. (p.4) What might Higgins be suggesting here?
12. On page 31, we have a potted history of the world. We learn about man's various excursions into space, his struggle with water and fuel supplies, as well as political unrest. Read this section and note the way in which current problems of the 21st century have impacted upon the future. Is this the way you believe our future is heading? Write a creative story set 100 years in the future basing your changed world on current phenomena.
13. In Chapter 3, the author lets us know that ISIS is watching Nik. After the explosion, Mace warns Nik to '...steer clear of ISIS. Don't talk to them. Don't let them find you', (p.41) and yet all of Nik's friends are ISIS recruits and he is himself devastated by not having been recruited. According to your reading so far, who is enemy and who is friend? Justify your answer with examples from the text.
14. After the explosion we are told, 'But no one came. No one came.' (p.37) 'Nobody moved us on. Nobody noticed us.' (p.44) Later, 'That's when I let myself hear what I'd been thinking all morning. No one is coming. No troops in their jeeps. No Police. No emergency services. No one.' (p.55) Who does Nik expect and why is he so troubled by the lack of help? What might this suggest?
15. Read chapters 8 and 9 and find textual references that indicate that Jono is suspicious of his classmate Nik.
16. Page 61 is devoted to a history of the conflict and provides the reader with information about the struggle. While we read facts, note that these are presented from Nik's perspective but informed by his teachers. Find the phrases in the passage that might hint that an alternative reading of this history is possible.
17. What evidence is there that the officer who eventually arrives on the scene presents a view of the situation that is clearly designed to calm the masses and ensure cooperation?
18. Higgins has told her story thus far in retrospect. Do you think this device of retrospective telling is a successful way to structure the story? Why? Why not?
19. Design an entry for Wikipedia called, 'The history of the conflict: Cityside versus Southside'. Ensure that you have hyperlinks to ISIS, Breken (both language and people) Gilgate, St. Clare, Pathmakers etc.
20. How would you characterise the relationship between Sol and Nik? Include textual evidence of their closeness.

#### Extension Activities

- Read some other authors who use this same device at chapter's end to deepen the mystery and ensure that the audience reads on (e.g. Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy).
- Read George Orwell's *1984* and compare the way in which information is controlled as a strategy for controlling human behaviour and thinking.
- Read *A Tide Flowing* by Joanne Phipson and discuss the way in which the author plays with chronology to tell her story.
- Read *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner to see another approach to structuring story.

#### Read chapters 11–20 and consider the following:

21. Examine the account of the soldier who comes to help Dash, Jono and Nik. (pp.75–76) What is the truth about the state of affairs according to his

version? Why did the officer who turned up at St John's church (p.63) lie about the General? What did he hope to gain by this lie?

22. Re-read the nursery rhyme that Fyffe and Nik recite from their childhood. (p.79) What is the message of this rhyme? What reality is being perpetuated?
23. ISIS and their supporters had portrayed an image of the Southside amongst the students of the Academy. The reality of Southside is described by Nik on pages 85–87. In what way is it a more 'pleasant' place than the life on Cityside? Account for this discrepancy.
24. On pages 88–89 we read an account of the history lessons taught by the teachers at the Academy. As the story unfolds, Nik discovers that there is more than one version of this truth and that history and facts depend on perspective. Explain this idea and find evidence on the internet which demonstrates that the same piece of information can be used for both affirmation and condemnation of others.
25. Organise a debate on the topic: truth is an illusion.
26. Describe the procession of 'Crossing' as if you are an eye-witness reporter to the event. Include interviews with those involved. Prepare a radio broadcast in which you deliver your account. Present it to the class.
27. Compare Commander Vega's perspective of the war with Nik's experience.
28. Fyffe observes one of the keen ironies of war: 'How could you take such care with this child here and plant a bomb in a school over there!' (p.118) What is so troubling about this behaviour? Compare this with Hitler's policy of genocide and his passion for classical music and the arts. Use these examples to make a comment on the nature of humankind.
29. 'The part of my brain that was watching for her was also registering how easy it was to sit there and read screen after screen of Breken...' (p.122) Why is Nik so troubled by his ability to understand Breken? What might be the truth behind his apparent innate understanding?
30. Even in a different world, a different time and a different place, politics seem to be significant in the control of society. (pp.125–126) What does this tell us about humankind? Discuss this in relation to Orwell's theme in *Animal Farm*: 'Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.'
31. The politics of Remnant seems to require that women remain in a background role and that the power of God is used to invoke fear: 'You appear but rarely at prayer, you scorn the modesty of widows, you assume control of affairs that should concern no woman.' (pp.126–127) Compare this attitude to the politics of other dictatorships in our time. What are your conclusions about methods of control used by dictators?
32. Fyffe, who now works in the infirmary on Southside, is concerned about the 'over-crowding' and the lack of

medicines, '...they've almost nothing to treat people with'. Is she fickle or is there another explanation for her apparent change of allegiances at this point? What do we understand about perspective in a conflict from this snippet? She also struggles with another apparent mixed message: 'I can't get it straight in my head how they can be bombers and kidnappers and at the same time be saying that looting and trafficking are illegal.' (p.141) Explain these contradictions of war.

33. What do you believe is the symbol of the talisman worn by Nik and by the dying man in the infirmary?

#### Extension Activities

- Look up the meaning of the word 'propaganda'. Propaganda can be both written and visual. Google specific examples of war propaganda which have been used by different countries to convey their own perspective on war. What is the danger of propaganda?
- Write a feature article for a newspaper exploring propaganda as it has been used in modern times.
- Research some traditional nursery rhymes and their origins. What events in history were they trying to explain? Promote? Cover up?

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#### Read chapters 21–30 and consider the following:

34. Demonstrate that all those involved in the conflict to date are engaged in some form of corruption. Use the text to prove your claims and then comment on Higgins' message concerning the corruptive influence of power.
35. When Nik enters the council room he recognises it as a replica of the library from the Tornmoor Academy over the bridge. He refers to it as a 'doppelganger'. (p.156) What is a doppelganger and why does Higgins ensure that readers are aware of a mirror image on the other side of the river?
36. Remnant leader Terten is determined to effect a coup. He claims to be operating to avoid corruption in the community. (p.160) Comment on the irony here.
37. Levkova accuses Terten: 'You glorify righteous confrontation, but you do it on the bodies of our children...' (p.160) Explain this accusation. In what way is it true?
38. Explain the way Remnant used Nik to justify its takeover of the council.
39. What is Levkova's motivation in providing medical help and food to Nik?
40. In what way is the treatment of the elderly an indication of the fabric of that society? How is this reflected in the treatment of Max? (p.173)
41. Levkova has proven to be a trustworthy individual and yet she expresses sentiments like the following in reference to Citysiders: 'They are born to privilege, Nik. They can't let it go. You must never trust one.'

(p.174) Nik is also informed by pre-conceived ideas, 'So much about these people was ordinary. No one was dancing gleefully on the grave of the city, no one was eating children.' (p.175) What do these comments tell us about the power of prejudice and propaganda to influence society?

42. Read the charter on page 184. Why does Levkova describe this as a utopian charter? Do you think any country can achieve such goals? Explain your answer.
43. Lanya's dream for the future is admirable: 'When we've won it, things will be different. We're going to throw open the bridges and smash the prisons and bring home the prisoners. There'll be hospitals full of medicine, and markets full of food, and banks of fuel cells for the taking. And we won't make the Citysiders slaves, even though that's what they did to us...and children won't die in winter, and old people will be warm and fed.' (p.200) Why is this sort of noble vision so un-nerving to Nik?
44. Explain the way a suicide mission works in the world of this book. How does this differ from a present day suicide bomber? Can either activity be justified?
45. As an investigative journalist, write a newspaper report explaining what you have uncovered in Goran's compound. (Chapter 29)

### Read chapter 30 and beyond

46. Higgins conveys Nik's delirious state through the appearance of the dead Lou. What is achieved by this device?
47. The doctor prepares a phial of truth serum to use on Fyffe and threatens to extract information in this way. Levkova is clearly troubled when Nik yells, 'It makes you...everything your enemies believe...you to be'. (p.237) Explain the reason that this comment is so poignant and unsettling.
48. Retell the facts of Nik's life from the information gleaned so far.
49. Imagine the reunion that Nik will have with his father. Write a detailed account of it. Now, turn to chapters 35 and 37 and compare your account of the meeting with the actual event. Make reference to Nik's comment, 'I hurt with an old ache that I'd thought I was done with a long time ago.' (p.282)
50. Examine again the two chapters where Nik meets his father and Levkova's explanation of Commander Stais' behaviour. (p.286) Write a character study of Commander Stais.
51. Nik is troubled by the reality of Southsiders compared with his learned picture of them, 'I thought I knew. I thought I knew what Southsiders were like'. (p.249) We are often troubled when reality does not match our image of it. Find examples in real life when this has occurred to you. Discuss them with a partner.
52. Levkova responds to Nik's protests regarding the suicide switch by claiming, 'It's war. And...they started it.' (p.285) Mount a case that argues that children should be running this world.
53. As a journalist for *The Times*, you have investigated both sides of the prisoner exchange involving Sol and Suzannah. Report on the events.
54. Write an obituary for Sol. Make specific reference to Sol's relationships with others.
55. Dash and Nik finally reunite but the meeting is strained. Demonstrate that Dash has lost her ability to see the human story beyond the conflict. Use chapters 41 and 44 to inform your comments.
56. Write the security file for Frieda Kellera. Include all known details of the actions with which she has been involved, her accomplices and the people with whom she liaises.
57. Use Suzannah Montier's comments about Commander Stais (p.315) to modify your earlier character study of him.
58. Suzannah Montier's conversation with Nik is seminal to the denouement of this story. What is the vital message which she conveys in her speech? What is the message she conveys through her death? What is the message that Higgins is trying to convey to readers?
59. Use your computer to design a flyer for public distribution which conveys the essence of Higgins' message in this novel.
60. When Montier is overwhelmed by the enormity of the task ahead, she advises, 'On those days I tell myself: don't look up, the mountain is too high; but choose for this day, for this moment, that's enough.' (p.318) Explain this philosophy and the way in which it can be applied in practice.
61. Nik describes himself saying: 'I'm no one and I don't fit in anywhere.' He is Breken, and yet he is also a Citysider trained by ISIS. How does Higgins use this dual allegiance to convey the complexity of brokering peace between opposing sides?
62. 'The dead drew me back to the bridge, and the living drew me across it.' (p.340) Explain the tension that tears at Nik.
63. Fyffe declares that she wants to save two lives: one for Lou and one for Sol. How does she carry out this promise?
64. Suzannah's murder encapsulates her worst fears: that no advancement towards peace can ever occur if revenge and retaliation continue to guide the actions of both sides. Examine the long passage on page 332, 'I felt Sol's blood...' and the way in which her warning becomes truth.

65. What is the message that Nik tries desperately to explain to his war-sullied father? Why is it that Nik and Lanya, Suzannah and Fyffe can see what the others can not?
66. Would you say that Nik and his father finally come to an understanding and even a little tenderness? Find evidence in the text to support your view.

#### Extension Activities

- Read William Blake's poem 'A Poison Tree' and discuss its message. Relate it to the message which lies at the heart of this book.
- Debate the topic: conflict is not always bad.