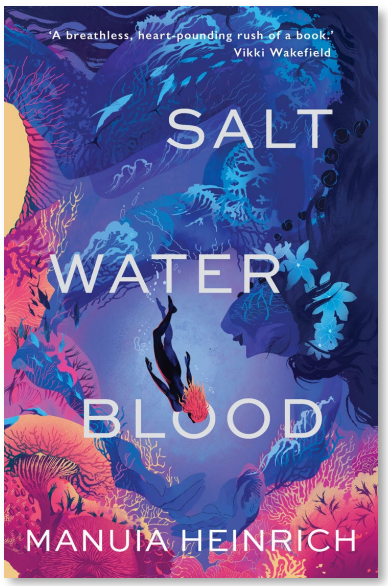

SALT WATER BLOOD

Written by MANUIA HEINRICH

RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 13-18 (LOWER AND UPPER SECONDARY)

GENRE: Thriller, mystery, supernatural, romance

THEMES: Mystery, romance, the supernatural, Pasifika culture, French Polynesia, colonialism and its legacies, anti-colonial eco-activism, racism, nuclear testing in the Pacific, environmental justice, intergenerational trauma, grief, resilience, belonging, community, voice and silencing, Indigenous ways of knowing

CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:

- English: Literature, literacy, and language
- Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS): History, geography
- Sustainability
- Ethical and Cultural Understanding
- Health and Physical Education

NOTES WRITTEN BY: Karys McEwen

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INTRODUCTION

Salt Water Blood is a compelling young adult speculative thriller that combines mystery, romance and the supernatural with an exploration of French Polynesian history, Indigenous identity and environmental injustice.

Eighteen-year-old Moe is an Indigenous teenager living on a fictional island in French Polynesia. Moe possesses an extraordinary connection to the natural world: she can hear the thoughts of the ocean. When the sea warns her that her younger brother, Tao, will drown, Moe is forced to confront a power and a history that she has tried to resist. After Tao's girlfriend disappears and Tao is found with blood on his hands and no memory of what happened, Moe must work to uncover the truth and clear her brother's name.

At the centre of the novel is Moe's relationship with the ocean. Author Manuia Heinrich has described the ocean as a major character in the story and explains that for many Pacific Islanders it is understood not simply as landscape, but as a life-giving, protective and spiritual presence. Heinrich draws on an Indigenous worldview in which the spiritual and supernatural are interconnected with everyday experience.

Against its mystery and speculative elements, *Salt Water Blood* engages with the history and continuing consequences of French colonialism and nuclear testing in the Pacific. Between 1966 and 1996, France conducted nearly 200 nuclear weapons tests at Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls in French Polynesia. This history is deeply personal for Heinrich: her mother grew up in Tahiti during the period of nuclear testing and later died from one of the illnesses explored in the novel.

The result is a novel that asks readers to look beyond familiar images of the Pacific as a picturesque tourist destination and consider the histories, cultures, injustices and communities that exist 'behind the postcard'. At the same time, Heinrich deliberately uses the conventions of young adult fiction, including mystery, romance, humour and speculative storytelling, to create an engaging reading experience.

Salt Water Blood offers rich opportunities for classroom study. Students can explore genre and narrative structure; character, voice and perspective; representation and cultural identity; colonialism and environmental justice; the relationship between people and the natural world; and the ways fiction can bring neglected histories into contemporary conversations.

PLOT SUMMARY

Eighteen-year-old Moe lives on a fictional French Polynesian island and has an unusual gift: she can hear the thoughts of the sea. But Moe's relationship with the ocean is complicated. Fear and generational trauma have led her to resist listening to it. When the sea predicts that her younger brother Tao will drown, however, ignoring its warnings becomes increasingly difficult.

Then Tao's girlfriend disappears. Tao is found with blood on his hands and no memory of what happened, and is accused of murder. Determined to discover the truth and clear her brother's name, Moe joins forces with school rival Temanea to investigate. As Moe investigates Tao's case, she is also drawn towards the truth behind a mysterious sickness affecting her community.

As the mystery unfolds, Moe must confront not only immediate dangers but the histories and traumas that have shaped her family and community. Her journey becomes one of listening: to the ocean, to the past, to her community and ultimately to her own voice.

Blending mystery, romance and speculative storytelling, *Salt Water Blood* connects Moe's personal struggle with the wider history and continuing legacy of colonialism, environmental injustice and French nuclear testing in the Pacific.

BEFORE READING

When people imagine French Polynesia and other Pacific islands, what images come to mind?

- Individually, students brainstorm words and images they associate with French Polynesia. These might come from tourism advertising, films, television, social media or other popular representations.
- In groups, students categorise their responses. What kinds of images dominate? What aspects of life, history or culture might be absent?
- Research some contemporary tourism advertising for French Polynesia. What words, colours, images and ideas recur?
- Consider how Heinrich wants readers to understand what lies 'behind the postcard' – a history and the impact of colonial and environmental justice.
- What might she mean?
- Return to the initial brainstorm after reading the novel. What would students now add, remove or complicate?

Discuss the potential problems that arise when a place or culture is predominantly represented to outsiders through tourism.

Before reading, students can also undertake introductory research into:

- French colonisation of French Polynesia
- the Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls
- French nuclear testing between 1966 and 1996
- the environmental and human consequences of nuclear testing
- Pacific resistance to nuclear testing
- contemporary nuclear and climate justice activism in the Pacific.

Ask students to create a timeline containing key events. Keep the timelines and revisit them during and after reading.

Students should consider the difference between knowing this history as a series of facts and encountering its consequences through fictional characters. What might literature enable readers to understand that a timeline cannot?

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

ENGLISH

LITERATURE: GENRE

Salt Water Blood combines conventions from several genres, including mystery/thriller, romance and speculative fiction.

As students read, create a genre chart with three columns:

	Mystery/Thriller	**Romance**	**Speculative Fiction**
What conventions appear?			
What expectations do they create?			
How does Heinrich use or challenge them?			

Discuss:

- Which genre initially seems most important?
- Does this change during the novel?
- How do the different genres complement one another?
- Why might Heinrich have chosen to tell a story about colonial and environmental injustice through an entertaining YA thriller rather than historical realism?
- Does the pleasure of solving a mystery make readers more receptive to the novel's historical and political concerns?

LITERATURE: CHARACTER

Heinrich has described the ocean as a major character in *Salt Water Blood*. Ask students to collect passages throughout the novel in which the ocean appears, communicates or influences Moe.

For example:

Will you listen, child?

Will you save me – save us?

(p. 107)

Consider:

- How is the ocean characterised?
- What qualities does it possess?
- Does Moe's perception of the ocean change?
- What does the ocean know that human characters do not?
- When does Moe listen to it, and when does she resist it?
- What are the consequences?
- How would the novel change if the ocean were treated simply as setting?

Students can create a character profile for the ocean in the same format they would use for Moe, Tao or Temanea, identifying its characteristics, motivations, relationships, conflicts and influence on the narrative.

Discuss the difference between personifying nature and understanding the natural world as possessing its own agency. How might different cultural worldviews affect a reader's interpretation of the ocean?

LITERATURE: CHARACTER

Choose Moe, Tao, Temanea or another significant character and create a character map that tracks: What the character says > What the character does > What others say about them > What the reader infers.

Then discuss how relationships change across the novel. For Moe in particular, track her movement between: fear > resistance > listening > understanding > voice > action.

Is this progression straightforward, or does she move backwards as well as forwards?

LITERATURE: THEMES

Heinrich has explained that Moe's initial refusal to listen to the ocean operates partly as a metaphor for humanity's failure to respond to environmental warnings.

Discuss:

- Why does Moe resist what the ocean tells her?
- What role does fear play in her response?
- How is her response connected to generational trauma?

- What parallels can be drawn between Moe's behaviour and contemporary responses to climate change?
- What might the novel suggest about the consequences of ignoring uncomfortable knowledge?

Ask students to choose a contemporary environmental issue and identify some of the warnings that scientists, Indigenous communities, activists or the natural environment itself are giving. Why might individuals, communities or governments find these warnings difficult to act upon?

LITERATURE: VOICE

Create two columns headed VOICE and SILENCE. As students read, record moments when characters:

- speak out
- conceal information
- are ignored
- refuse to listen
- tell stories
- are prevented from telling stories
- reclaim knowledge
- challenge authority.

Heinrich describes silencing as one of the continuing consequences of colonisation. Using evidence from the novel, discuss how Moe's personal journey towards finding her voice connects with the wider experience of her community. Consider the difference between having a voice and being heard.

LITERATURE: WORLDVIEW

The supernatural elements of *Salt Water Blood* include a thinking and speaking ocean and other aspects of a natural world possessing knowledge and agency. Heinrich has said that speculative elements felt natural to her because spiritual and supernatural understandings are part of an Indigenous worldview.

- How can speculative fiction, even when it imagines a world different to our own, help us understand the world we live in?
- Why might one reader describe an event as supernatural while another understands it within a cultural or spiritual worldview?
- How can fantasy/speculative genre labels reflect particular cultural assumptions?
- Does knowing Heinrich's perspective change how students interpret the novel's speculative elements?

Students might compare *Salt Water Blood* with another text in which the natural or spiritual world has agency. What assumptions does each text make about relationships between humans, place and the non-human world?

LITERATURE: STRUCTURE

The novel includes short intercalary chapters voiced by Moana, the ocean itself. Intercalary chapters are sections in a novel that connect to the main theme but do not necessarily advance the core plot or feature the primary characters.

As students encounter these sections, consider:

- How do they differ stylistically and structurally from Moe's narrative?
- What different information or perspective do these sections provide?

- How do they affect the reader's experience of suspense?
- Why might Heinrich have chosen to separate these sections from the main narrative?
- What would be lost if they were removed?

Revisit the first Moana intercalary chapter (p. 1) and compare it with a later section such as on p. 166.

Choose a significant scene and experiment with inserting an additional short intercalary passage from another perspective. Students should be able to explain what their additional passage contributes to the reader's understanding.

LITERATURE: GENRE

Create a Suspect Tracker and update it throughout the novel. For each suspect, record:

- possible motive
- evidence
- suspicious behaviour
- evidence against their involvement
- unanswered questions
- current likelihood of guilt.

Students should distinguish carefully between fact, inference and assumption.

Periodically stop reading and have students make a written prediction about the solution to the mystery. They must support their theory with three pieces of textual evidence.

After the reveal, return to earlier predictions. Which clues did Heinrich foreground, and which were easier to overlook? Were there red herrings? At what point, if any, could a particularly attentive reader reasonably have solved the mystery?

LITERATURE: RELATIONSHIPS

Track the changing relationship between Moe and Temanea as they investigate together. What are Moe's initial assumptions about Temanea? Which events challenge or reinforce those assumptions? How does Heinrich use their relationship to create tension alongside the central mystery? Consider how the romantic storyline intersects with, rather than interrupts, the mystery plot.

LITERATURE: SETTING

Return to Heinrich's desire to represent what exists 'behind the postcard' image of French Polynesia.

Find examples of the novel presenting:

- natural beauty
- community
- everyday life
- cultural knowledge
- colonial history
- environmental damage
- racism
- resistance and activism.

Does the novel reject the idea of French Polynesia as beautiful, or complicate it? What is the difference?

LITERACY: READING FOR CLUES

Mystery fiction requires readers to remember details, make connections and continually revise interpretations.

Select a chapter containing an important clue and identify:

- What information is explicitly stated?
- What must the reader infer?
- What does Moe believe at this point?
- What does the reader believe?
- What questions remain unanswered?

Discuss how authors control what readers know and when they know it.

LITERACY: FACT, FICTION AND HISTORY

Choose one historical element referenced in the novel and investigate it independently. Possible areas include:

- French nuclear testing
- Moruroa
- Fangataufa
- colonialism in French Polynesia
- health effects associated with nuclear testing
- Pacific anti-nuclear activism.

Create a two-part response:

What happened? Present a concise factual explanation using reliable sources.

How does fiction represent its impact? Explain how *Salt Water Blood* transforms historical information into human experience.

LITERACY: UN SPEECH

Examine the speech Moe and Vincent deliver at the UN on nuclear testing (pp. 344-347). Identify the persuasive techniques Heinrich uses. These might include techniques such as emotive language, factual evidence, repetition, inclusive language, personal testimony, appeals to justice or calls to action.

Who is Moe and Vincent's audience? What do they want them to think, feel and do? Students can then write and deliver their own short speech drawing attention to an environmental or social justice issue that matters to them. They should deliberately employ at least three persuasive techniques identified in Moe and Vincent's speech.

LITERACY: READING JOURNAL

At several points during the novel, students complete:

- I KNOW: three things established by textual evidence.
- I THINK: two conclusions I currently infer.
- I WONDER: one question I still need answered.

This can be particularly useful during the mystery plot and encourages students to separate evidence from assumption.

LANGUAGE: GIVING NATURE A VOICE

Collect examples of language used to describe the sea and other parts of the natural world. Analyse Heinrich's choices of verbs, imagery, figurative language, sensory language, dialogue or communication and modality.

Compare a passage in which nature possesses agency with a conventional factual description of the same environment. Students then rewrite a description of a familiar natural environment (i.e. a river, beach, forest, park or mountain) so that the environment itself possesses agency. Avoid simply adding human dialogue. Instead, consider what that place might notice, remember, want or resist.

LANGUAGE: THE LANGUAGE OF POWER

Collect words and phrases associated with authority, colonisation, protest and resistance. Then ask students to consider:

- Who is permitted to speak?
- Whose language carries authority?
- Whose knowledge is questioned?
- How does language reinforce or challenge power?

Students can examine differences between the language characters use in private conversations and in moments of public speaking or resistance.

LANGUAGE: NAMES, WORDS AND CONTEXT

Identify culturally specific words, names and references throughout the novel. For example, examine fenua (p. 5), Māʻohi (p. 12), tamaʻaraʻa (p. 21), paʻia (p. 21) and gendarmes (p.31). What can readers infer before seeking a definition?

Before immediately looking unfamiliar terms up, ask:

- Can meaning be inferred from context?
- Does the author explain the term?
- Is explanation actually necessary?
- Who is the assumed reader?
- What happens when authors refuse to translate or explain every aspect of a culture for outsiders?

Discuss whether readers should expect every cultural reference in a novel to be made immediately accessible to them.

ASSESSMENT IDEA: ANALYTICAL RESPONSE

How does Manuia Heinrich use the conventions of speculative fiction to explore real historical and environmental concerns in *Salt Water Blood*?

OR 'Finding your voice is not enough; you also need someone willing to listen.' Discuss this statement in relation to *Salt Water Blood*.

OR

How does *Salt Water Blood* challenge simplistic representations of the Pacific?

ASSESSMENT IDEA: CREATIVE RESPONSE

Write an intercalary chapter that could be inserted into *Salt Water Blood*. Choose a perspective that adds something the reader cannot access through Moe's narration.

Accompany the piece with a short commentary explaining your choices of perspective, voice, imagery and placement.

ASSESSMENT IDEA: MULTIMODAL RESPONSE

Create a campaign titled Behind the Postcard that challenges a stereotypical representation of a place or community. Combine images, research and persuasive language to reveal something frequently excluded from mainstream representations.

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS): HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY

HISTORY: HISTORICAL MEMORY

Between 1966 and 1996, France conducted nearly 200 nuclear weapons tests at Moruroa and Fangataufa in French Polynesia.

Students can investigate:

- Why did France conduct nuclear testing in the Pacific?
- Who made the decisions about where testing would occur?
- How were local communities affected?
- What information was available to communities at the time?
- What resistance emerged within French Polynesia and across the Pacific?
- What are the continuing health, political and environmental consequences?
- How has the history been remembered or silenced?

HISTORY: WHOSE HISTORY?

Heinrich has explained that nuclear testing was not openly discussed while she was growing up, despite its profound impact on her community.

Discuss why communities or governments might avoid talking about traumatic historical events.

Students investigate another historical event that has been marginalised, suppressed or contested. Consider:

- Who recorded the dominant version?
- Whose perspectives were missing?
- How has understanding changed?
- What role can literature play in recovering or communicating marginalised histories?

HISTORY: NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Compare *Salt Water Blood* with a contemporary representation of nuclear weapons such as *Oppenheimer* (2023), *A House of Dynamite* (2025) or the documentary series *Turning Point: The Bomb and the Cold War* (2024).

Consider whose perspective sits at the centre of each text. What changes when nuclear history is considered from the perspective of communities living where weapons were tested rather than scientists, politicians or military leaders?

GEOGRAPHY: THE PACIFIC

Locate French Polynesia, Tahiti, Moruroa and Fangataufa on a map. Research French Polynesia's:

- geography
- climate
- population
- languages
- political status

- cultural diversity
- economy
- relationship with France.

Compare this information with the representation students encountered in tourism material before reading. What does *Salt Water Blood* add to their understanding of the region?

GEOGRAPHY: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Environmental damage is rarely experienced equally. Define environmental justice and consider:

- Who receives the benefits of environmentally damaging activities?
- Who experiences the risks?
- Who makes the decisions?
- Whose knowledge is considered?
- Who is responsible for repairing damage?

Apply these questions to nuclear testing in French Polynesia. Students can then research another environmental justice issue in the Pacific or their own region and compare it with the concerns explored in the novel.

SUSTAINABILITY

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DON'T LISTEN?

Heinrich describes Moe's refusal to listen to the ocean as a metaphor for humanity's failure to respond to warnings from nature. In groups, choose a contemporary environmental issue.

Create a Warnings / Responses / Consequences / Possibilities chart:

Warnings	Responses	Consequences	Possibilities
What are we being told?	How are people responding?	What happens if we ignore it?	What action remains possible?

Groups present their findings and propose one realistic action that could be taken by individuals, communities and governments.

Discuss whether hope in environmental fiction requires believing that every problem can be solved.

ETHICAL AND CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

WHO GETS TO TELL THE STORY?

Heinrich has spoken about the importance of Pacific Islander people being able to tell their own stories rather than continually being represented by outsiders. Discuss:

- Why does authorship matter?
- What is the difference between writing about a community and writing from within a community?
- Can writers represent cultures other than their own responsibly?
- What responsibilities might writers have when doing so?

- Why is it important for a literary culture to contain many perspectives rather than expecting one writer to 'represent' an entire community?

Investigate the work of several contemporary Indigenous Pacific writers. What similarities and differences exist between their perspectives, genres and concerns?

KNOWLEDGE AND RESPECT

When encountering cultural or spiritual beliefs different from their own, readers sometimes immediately categorise them as myth, magic, superstition or fantasy.

Discuss what assumptions these words can carry. How can readers remain open to ways of understanding the world that differ from their own?

Develop a short class protocol for respectfully discussing cultural knowledge and belief when studying literature.

HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

RESILIENCE, BELONGING AND COMMUNITY

Salt Water Blood explores trauma and resilience not only as individual experiences but as experiences shaped by family, history and community. Discuss:

- What helps Moe respond to fear and uncertainty?
- How do relationships contribute to her resilience?
- What is the difference between resilience and simply enduring harm?
- Why might belonging to a community provide strength?
- Can communities themselves demonstrate resilience?
- What does the novel suggest about the relationship between acknowledging difficult histories and moving forward?

Students can create a web of belonging for a character, showing the people, places, cultural connections, memories and communities that shape their sense of identity.

FURTHER CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

PLAYLIST

Music can communicate character, mood and theme. Choose five songs for a *Salt Water Blood* playlist. For each song, explain:

- where it belongs in the novel
- which character/theme/relationship it represents
- how particular musical or lyrical qualities connect with the text.

Alternatively, compare Moe's playlist with your own and choose a song that resonates with you for similar reasons.

MESSAGES FROM NATURE

Imagine that another element of the natural world could communicate directly with a character. What would it say?

Write a short exchange or prediction in a style consistent with the world Heinrich has created. Then explain what your chosen natural element represents and why you gave it this particular voice.

READING BINGO

Create a bingo card containing recurring elements readers should watch for, such as:

- a clue
- an image associated with death or danger
- a supernatural warning
- a moment of humour
- an act of resistance
- an environmental image
- an example of cultural knowledge
- a moment when Moe refuses to listen
- a moment of connection
- something that changes your theory about the mystery.

Rather than simply crossing each item off, students record the relevant page/chapter and a brief explanation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MANUIA HEINRICH is a Tahitian Chinese writer based in Aotearoa, New Zealand. She holds a PhD in Pacific studies from Te Herenga Waka–Victoria University of Wellington; she also cofounded Pacific Islanders in Publishing and was a We Need Diverse Books mentee. *Salt Water Blood* is Manuia's debut novel.

ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE TEACHING NOTES

Karys McEwen is an author, school librarian and education advisor based in Naarm/Melbourne. She works across schools, literary organisations and professional associations to connect young people and teachers with contemporary Australian writing. Her practice focuses on inclusive collections, reading engagement, curriculum resources and meaningful classroom encounters with literature.

CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

Teachers may wish to pair *Salt Water Blood* with texts exploring related ideas such as:

- Indigenous and Pacific perspectives
- colonialism and its continuing legacies
- environmental justice
- climate activism
- relationships between people and Country/place/ocean
- speculative storytelling grounded in Indigenous worldviews
- young people finding and using their voices
- nuclear weapons and their human consequences.

OTHER RESOURCES

Teachers may wish to source reliable materials relating to:

- the history of French nuclear testing at Moruroa and Fangataufa
- the contemporary political status of French Polynesia
- Pacific anti-nuclear movements
- environmental and climate justice in the Pacific
- Indigenous Pacific perspectives on ocean, land and community
- Nuclear and Climate Justice Week, Tahiti
- Manuia Heinrich's interviews and commentary about *Salt Water Blood.*

Where possible, prioritise resources produced by Pacific organisations, researchers, writers and communities rather than relying exclusively on outside accounts of Pacific experiences.